THE COMPLETE STORY

QUEEN

CLASSIC ROCK PRESENTS

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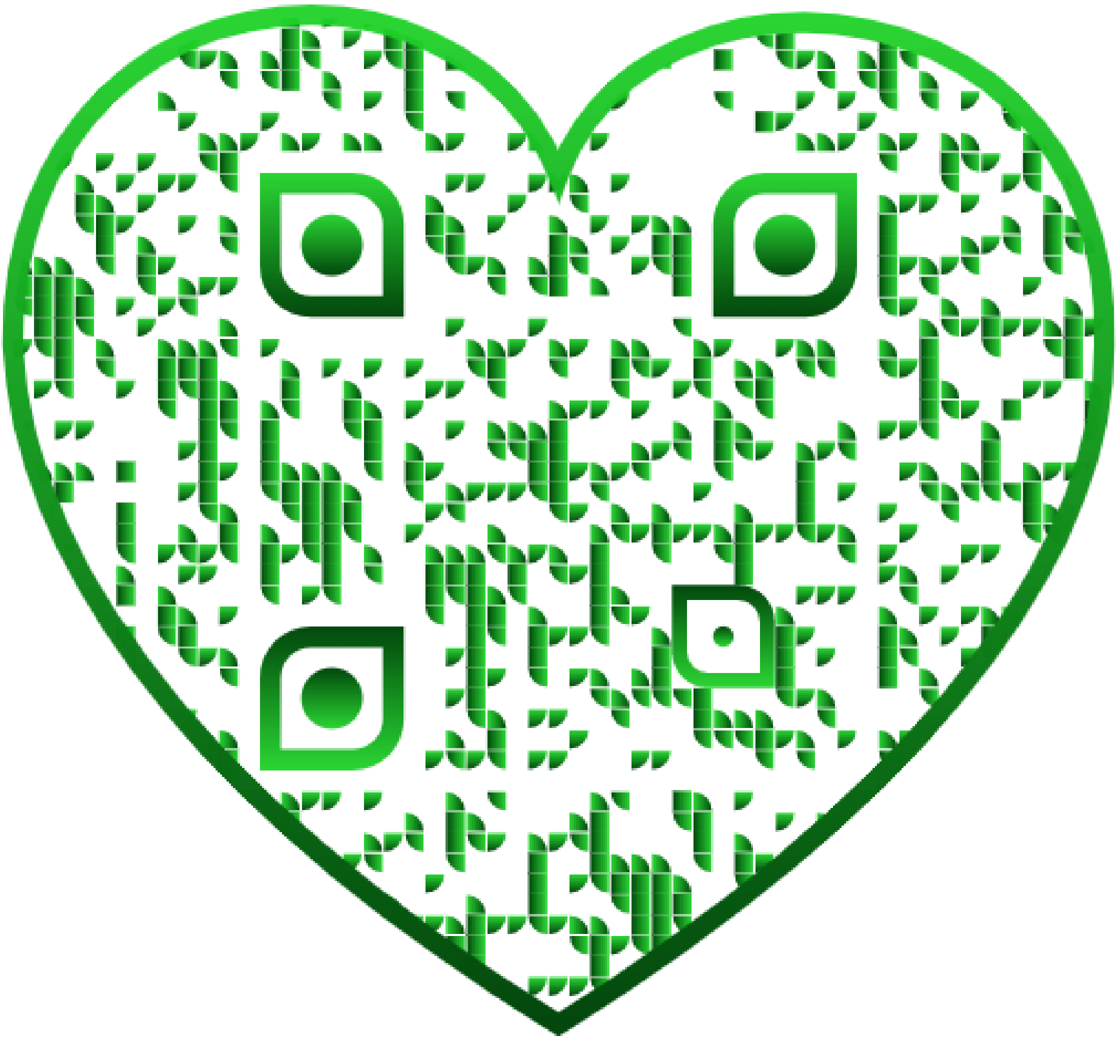

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To a nine year old kid, listening to his dad's copy of Queen's *Greatest Hits* on a state-of-the-art 1981 Hitachi stereo for the first time was like stepping through a portal into another world. To my untrained ears, this was nothing like the plastic pop clogging up the charts of the time: there was stadium-sized heavy rock and delicate ballads, there was finger-popping funk and skyscraping gospel. And then there was this crazed operatic blowout that sounded like it had beamed into from… well, god knows where. Not that my tiny, nine-year old mind knew how to describe any of it. But I knew it was something unique and special.

Greatest Hits led to me saving up my paper round money to buy *Queen II*, complete with a crack in the vinyl that lasted precisely as long as opening track *Procession*. That led to *News Of The World*, which led to *Sheer Heart Attack*, which led to *The Works* which led to… watching that triumphant Live Aid set with the windows fully opened and the volume on the TV turned right up, just like everybody else on the street.

Nearly 40 years on, that initial thrill hasn't subsided. Queen have ebbed and flowed in and out of fashion (if we're being honest, they've always been more 'out' than 'in', at least if you pay attention to the self-appointed arbiters of cool), but that music – and the four men who made it – remains as dazzling and innovative as ever. They were virtuosos, mavericks, entertainers and visionaries all at once.

Every Queen studio album, from their powerhouse debut to the blockbusting *A Night Of The Opera*, from the idiosyncratic *Jazz* to their emotional swansong *Made In Heaven*, contained an entire musical universe within its grooves. We hope to reflect that dazzling breadth in this collection of exclusive interviews and features from the pages of *Classic Rock* magazine and beyond – the finest coverage of this most majestic of bands you'll read anywhere.

And that battered old copy of Queen's *Greatest Hits*? It's still there, the proud centrepiece of my record collection. Long may they reign.

Dave Everley,
Editor

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We asked Queen fans everywhere to vote for the band's greatest anthems – and this is what you told us.

GETTY X2

NO TIME FOR LOSERS

More than 45 years on from their first album, **Queen** remain champions of the world. We look back at their first 15 years, from just another band of hopefuls, to global superstars, through worrying slump to ruling Live Aid. It was no bed of roses, no pleasure cruise, but they kept on fighting.

Words: **Mick Wall**

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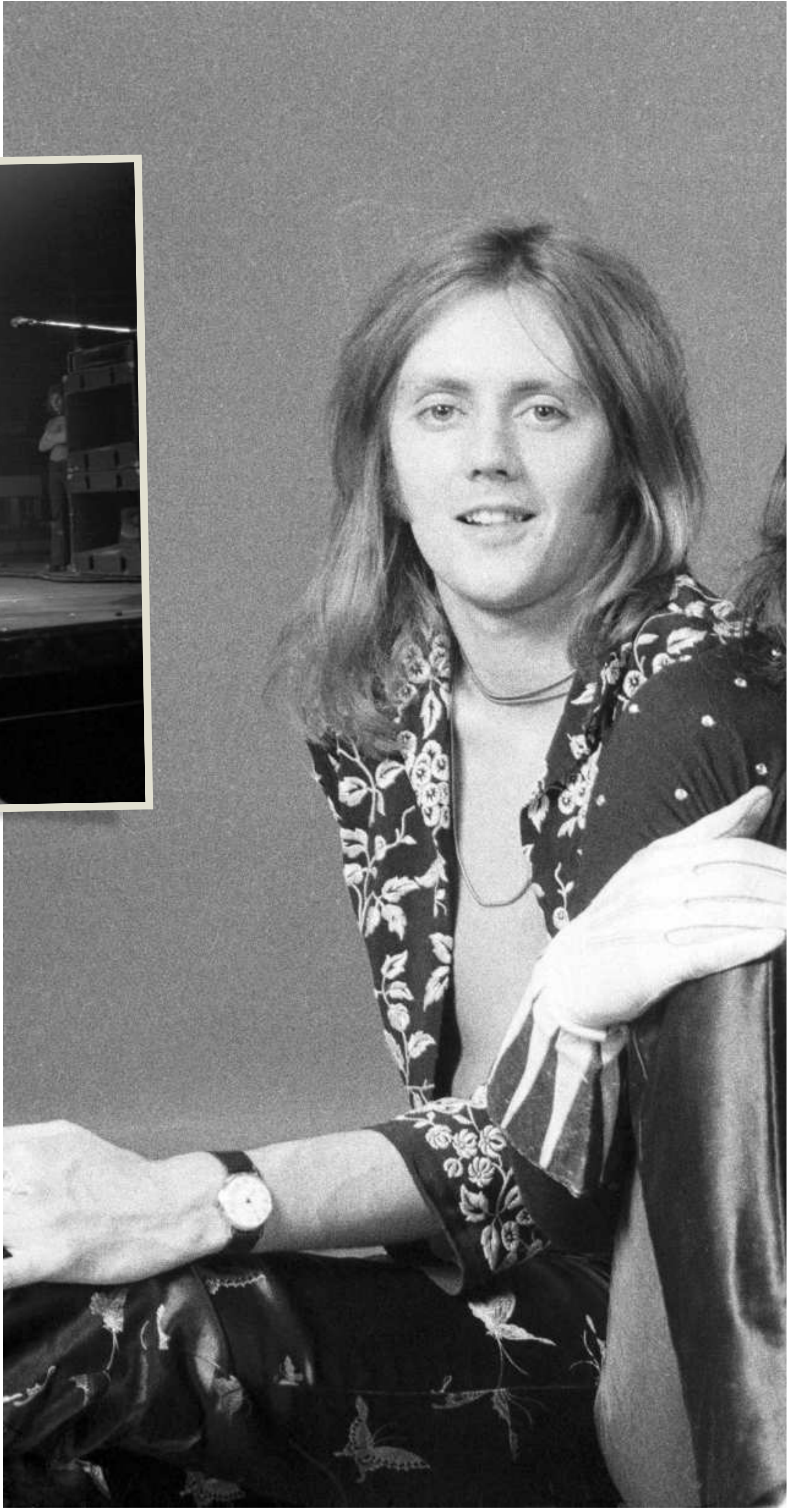


"If this is our brightest hope for the future then we are committing rock'n'roll suicide."

***Record Mirror* in the early 70s**

Wembley Stadium, July 13, 1985. When Freddie Mercury skipped like a show pony on to the Live Aid stage, right arm aiming air-hooks at the sea of faces before him, it's worth remembering that Queen were at a new low point in their career. Following their controversial decision nine months previously to perform at Sun City, jewel in the segregated crown of apartheid-ruled South Africa – an act in direct violation of United Nations sanctions that would see them fined by the UK Musicians' Union and placed on a United Nations blacklist – Queen had become pariahs of pop; outcasts of rock; social, musical and political undesirables.

It didn't help that Queen had always been portrayed in the press as pompous, aloof, arrogant even. It was there in their music: arch, grandiose, majestic. It was there even in the way they performed: Freddie, pouring champagne over the heads of the audience at Madison Square Garden, boasting of bringing ballet to the masses and declaring: "Darling, I'm simply dripping with money! It may be vulgar, but it's wonderful."

None of that, though, had ever stopped Queen fans from simply loving them, the same way they did the real Royals: unequivocally, unashamedly, undeniably, no matter what.

The stink of those South African shows had clung to Queen though in a way it seemed impossible to shake off. Right up to the moment that Freddie plonked himself down at the piano on stage at Wembley Stadium that hot, never-to-be-forgotten day and picked out the blissfully familiar intro to *Bohemian Rhapsody* – and all 72,000 people there, plus the 1.9 billion across the globe watching on TV at home, went crazy.

From there it just got better. As they segued into the intro to *Radio Ga Ga*, Freddie was up and prancing, rolling those shoulders and pursing those lips, eyes sparkling as he waved around that phallic truncated mic stand like a sceptre. Watching a YouTube clip of it now, that glorious moment when the ecstatic Wembley crowd do the synchronised hand-clapping à la the *Radio Ga Ga* video, the shivers still spiral up the spine. It's a moment of musical divinity. An actual shot of rock immortality. And Freddie knew it.

As Live Aid organiser Bob Geldof put it: "Queen was absolutely the best band of the day. They played the best, had the best sound, used their time to the full. It was the perfect stage for Freddie – the whole world. And he could ponce about on stage doing *We Are The Champions*. How more perfect could it get?"

The answer: it couldn't.

No time for losers. That had always been the Queen credo. Yet only in so much as it applied to the band members' own aspirations. As Brian May later explained to me: "It wasn't meant as a put-down or an arrogant thing. When Freddie wrote that it was more directed at himself, a kind of self-affirming thing. You'd say: 'You can't do that! We'll get slaughtered.' He'd just go: 'Yes we can.' And he was right."

Any other band might have given up, such were the unpromising circumstances that greeted Queen's arrival on to the London scene in 1973.

So there was Brian, the nerdy space brain who'd built his own guitar from a fireplace (a what?) and liked to wear capes and clogs on stage; John Deacon, another Bunsen-burning bright boy, who always looked the most doubtful; or as he later put it: "I knew there was something," but wasn't "convinced of it" until long after Queen became stars; Roger Taylor, the blond, pretty-as-a-daffodil

GETTY x2

Up and coming hopefulls Queen in 1973: (l-r) Roger Taylor, Freddie Mercury, Brian May, John Deacon. (They ended up doing quite well.)

ex-public schoolboy from Cornwall who'd studied to become a dentist; and up front the brilliant Farrokh Bulsara – Freddie to his great many friends – who'd come from a boys' boarding school near Mumbai, India and was an arty, fashion-freaked, Hendrix-obsessed, pan-sexual dynamo who'd renamed himself Mercury after a line in one of his own songs. (*'Mother Mercury, look what they've done to me,'* from *The Fairy King*.)

A motley collection of over-entitled popinjays, you might say – and the critics said a lot worse – that had arrived late for the glam party, yet still opted for make-up and satin pants while remaining in thrall to the already past-it hippie fogey-isms of Zeppelin (*Ogre Battle*, anyone?) Or as that redoubtable organ of socio-musicological critique *Record Mirror* put it at the time: "If this is our brightest hope for the future then we are committing rock'n'roll suicide."

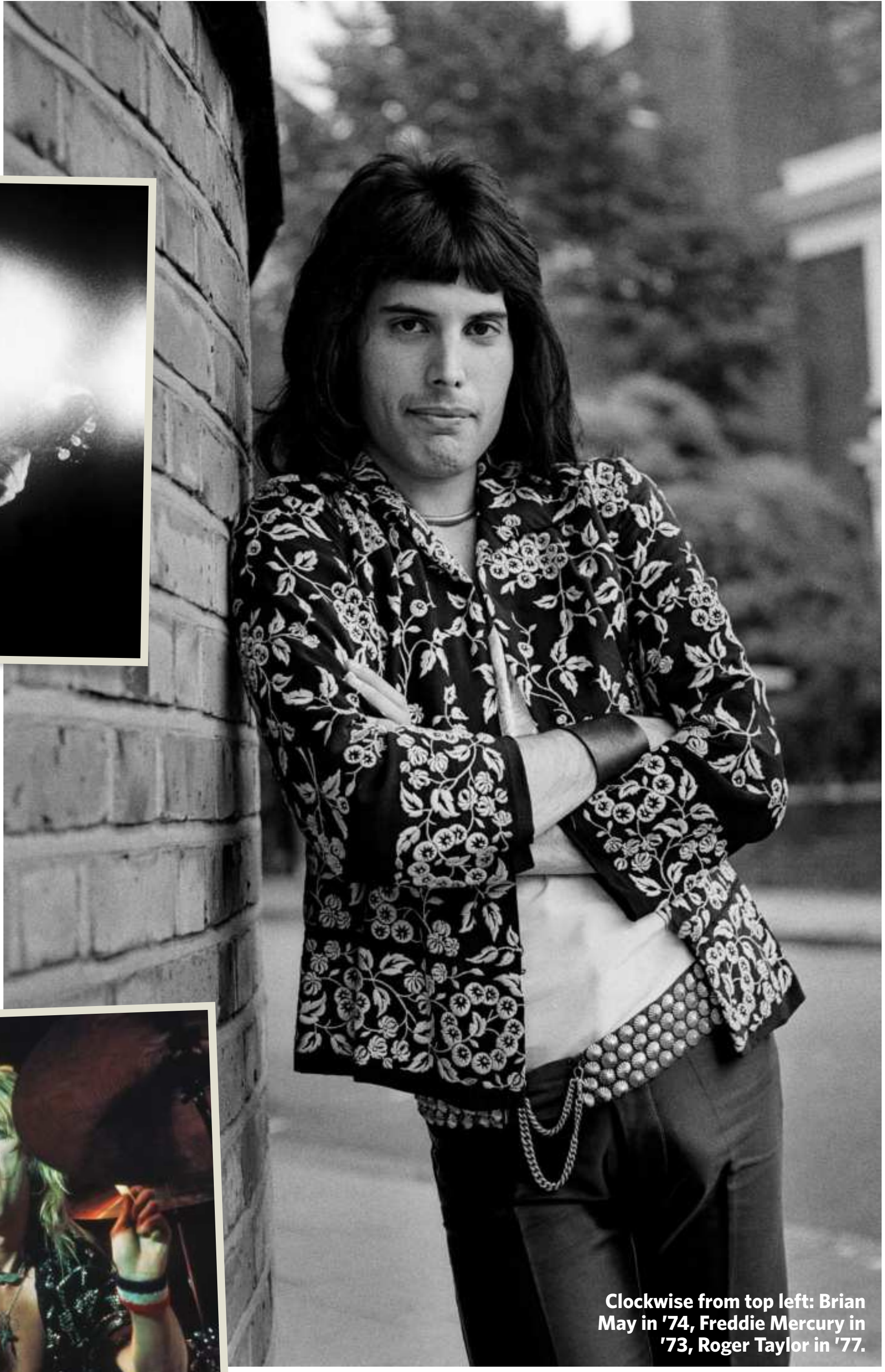
Nevertheless, in the summer of 1973 when Queen's self-titled first album was released, it was hard to place quite where the newbies-come-very-lately fitted exactly. Bowie had just retired Ziggy; Zep were already five albums and a million rainbows in; Yes and Genesis had already demarcated public-school prog; Rod Stewart and Elton John had cornered the good-geezer/wise-barfly market. What use, then, for another bunch of nail-polished, guitar screeching look-at-mes? Against that backdrop, what Queen had to offer appeared highly contrived – and in 1973 'contrived' was the worst insult you could throw at a band with pretensions to being true album-oriented contenders.

"Queen was absolutely the best band of the day. [Live Aid] was the perfect stage for Freddie – the whole world."

Live Aid organiser Bob Geldof

Even small victories came tainted. When *The Old Grey Whistle Test* producer Mike Appleton commissioned an animated sequence to run on the show as a visual to accompany a sub-Zep rocker titled *Keep Yourself Alive*, he admitted he had no idea it was a Queen track. He'd simply "found this white label in my office, no name on it, and liked the opening track".

There's one thing nobody could deny, though: Queen were always a great band live. They'd been honing their live act all through the two years it ⊳



Clockwise from top left: Brian May in '74, Freddie Mercury in '73, Roger Taylor in '77.

"The Queen boys had a roof over their heads and an old van. It was like they'd never sold a record."

Music industry manager Don Arden

took to complete their first album. Then in October 1973 they got their big break, opening for Mott The Hoople on a 31-date tour of the UK. You couldn't be 'contrived' and pull off performances of cinematic epics like *Father To Son* and *White Queen*. Clearly this was a band that knew how to rock. The worry was whether they would be able to roll with the changes long enough to really catch on.

They certainly talked a good game. May laughed when I reminded him once of Freddie's famous quote from those pre-fame days about refusing to take public transport.

"It's… slightly embellished," he chuckled. "I did a lot of bus journeys with Freddie, actually. If you ever get on a number nine bus and go upstairs and go to the front left, that's where Freddie and I used to sit, going up to Trident [studios, which their then managers, brothers Norman and Barry Sheffield owned] to beat them on the heads, to try and make them do something, cos we felt like we were in a backwater for so many years."

The backwater years ended in 1974, with the release in March of *Queen II*; more specifically, the hit single *Seven Seas Of Rhye*. More specifically still, their spectacular performance of it on *Top Of The Pops*. That weekly TV chart show meant everything in that largely pre-video age. As an over-impressionable 15-year old Ziggy-kid with Mott-spots and Zep-cravings, for me *Top Of The Pops* was where Queen really kept themselves alive in the mid-70s. One wild-eyed shot of them doing *Seven Seas Of Rhye* had me stealing a ten-bob note from my mum's purse in order to purchase the single during school lunch hour the next day.

It was the same when they came on doing *Killer Queen* – the most sublimely brilliant single of 1974 – later the same year. As for the adrenalin overload of watching them do *Now I'm Here* just weeks later. None of that 'ironic', 'we know that you know we're only miming' 80s nonsense with Queen in 1974. Look at the clip now of Freddie waggling his black nail-polished fingers in your face during *Killer Queen*, wrapped in bum-warmer fur while Brian and John throw cooler-than-thou, rock-idol shapes and Roger pouts as he pounds, and tell me you think they're faking it.

Looked back at now, it's easy to see the rest of Queen's career trajectory as an enviably upward line of unbroken success. That after the attention-grabbing *Queen II* and the pay-off of *Sheer Attack*, those two albums released within eight months of each other, their formula for success was firmly established. May brought the hard rock (*Now I'm Here*), Mercury the sophisticated pop (*Killer Queen*), while Taylor and Deacon were the Ringo and George of the group – the side salad to the steak (although both would later contribute their own significant hit singalongs to the Queen canon.)

In fact, the mid-70s found the band in a perilous place. They were big at home in Britain, and through *Killer Queen* getting bigger in Europe, and had the first signs of a US breakthrough when both *Killer Queen* and *Sheer Heart Attack* reached No.12 on their respective charts, but still just wage slaves, living in rented accommodation, sashaying around the clubs at night, scrabbling around to pay the bills the next morning.

Roger Taylor later recalled the band coming home from headlining two shows at the 15,000-capacity Budokan in Tokyo in the spring of 1975 and going home to his tiny bedsit in Richmond, and

GETTY x3

Killer Queen: Hammersmith Odeon, December '75.

"we were still on sixty quid a week". John Deacon, by now married, had to beg for the £2,000 he needed as a deposit on a house, while the Sheffield brothers who managed Queen were supposedly driving around in Rolls-Royces. Something would have to be done. Quickly.

Enter the most feared management figure in the London-based music business of the 1970s: Don Arden. Arden (father of Sharon, soon-to-be Osbourne) once described for me how he became involved with Queen. "Queen was at its height at the time, yet they were penniless," he said. "They didn't even have a car between them. Freddie and the rest of the guys in the band were friendly with Sharon, and so they asked for [my] advice. I [said] my advice would be to get their coats on and fuck off! But they said they wouldn't do that because they were terrified of the Sheffield boys – they had the group believing they ruled the streets of Soho. Well, we would see about that.

"Queen was signed to EMI, but the deal the label had done had been via the brothers' own production company. It was the same with all the deals the band made: nothing was signed directly to them, but to the brothers' production company. As a result, the brothers not only owned their management contract, they owned their recording contract and their song publishing too."

As a result, said Don, "the Queen boys had a roof over their heads and an old van they travelled in when they were on tour. I couldn't believe it. It was like they'd never sold a record. I said: 'Well, what do you want me to do?' They said: 'We want you to manage us, Don.' I said: 'Okay, get your lawyer to send me a letter confirming your intention to come to me, and I'll go and sort these fucking guys out for you.' We shook hands on it, and the very next day I drove up to Soho to see the Sheffields.

"I didn't actually bother making an appointment, I just turned up. I knew they were fakes. Sure enough, when I walked into their office and announced myself it scared the hell out of them. They began talking very fast, chattering away about how they'd just been shopping with their wives buying them jewellery. They were starting to make me sick, so I looked at my watch and said: 'Well, we've done with the niceties. Now listen to me very carefully. I'm not here to talk about your fucking wives. I'm here to inform you that you no longer represent Queen. It's over, okay? Finito.'

"They looked at each other. They might have put the frighteners on Queen, but did they have the balls to actually take on Don Arden? No, they fucking didn't. They couldn't even look me in the eyes. They were worried about what was coming next. Would I have a go? Maybe. But I wasn't evil to them. I didn't have to be. I just told them how stupid I thought they were. In fact I gave them a bit of a lecture. 'If you'd at least bought them all a fucking car and put a few quid in their pockets it would probably never have come to this,' I said. 'Why didn't you do all that and *then* think about screwing 'em? Well, you've blown it now. They're gone.'

"They hung their heads in shame. I told them that if they agreed to walk away right now this instant, they would get a cheque for a hundred thousand pounds for their trouble and they would never have to see me again. I pointed out that if they didn't agree, however, the group would still be gone but they wouldn't get any money at all, *and* they'd have me to deal with. They sensibly took the money.

"When I got back to the office that day and told [Queen] what I'd done they literally wept for joy. They were hugging me and kissing me. Then as soon as they got their hands on the money I never heard from them again."

In fact, as Sharon Osbourne later explained to me, the band had decided instead to go with Elton John's ▷

"Our songs are like Bic razors – designed for mass consumption and instantly disposable."

Freddie Mercury

Rising sons: Queen in the garden of their hotel in Tokyo, April 22, 1975.

GETTY x2

Queen on the set of Dutch TV show *TopPop* (Brian May unusually with a Strat instead of his signature Red Special), November 22, 1974.

manager, John Reid. The reason? "Freddie," she said. "John was gay too and I think Freddie just felt safer with him."

A shrewd music biz guru, Reid immediately proved his worth by making a decision that would transform the band's lives. It was Reid who put his foot down and absolutely insisted that the next Queen single should be a track that, on paper, appeared the least commercial of all the new material they were working on. A mock-opera, if you will, part ballad, part waltz, part rocktastic headbanger. It was called *Bohemian Rhapsody*. And when the suits at EMI heard it they nearly fainted. This was a joke, right? Wrong. This was a stroke of genius. We all know what happened next.

'When the suits at EMI heard *Bohemian Rhapsody* they nearly fainted. This was a joke, right?'

Roy Thomas Baker, the pop perfectionist who had produced all the Queen albums up until then, later recalled his time working with Freddie, listening, mouth open, as the singer demonstrated on the piano an "idea for a song" that he had.

"It was going to be a brief interlude of a few Galileos and then we'd get back to the rock part of the song," Baker memorably recalled years later. "When we started doing the opera section properly, it just got longer and longer."

Days went by with the recording. Every time a perplexed Baker thought they were done, "Freddie would come in with another lot of lyrics and say: 'I've added a few more Galileos here, dear,' and it just got bigger and bigger."

There had famously been long, 'journey' songs on albums before; tracks identified by their construction from seemingly disparate elements that built to a towering crescendo. The Beatles with *A Day In The Life* from the *Sgt Pepper's* album springs to mind easily, as does Led Zep's *Stairway To Heaven*. Also, most recently in the mind of Freddie Mercury, the three-part pop operetta *Une Nuit A Paris* from 10cc's summer 1975 album *The Original Soundtrack*.

None of those, though, had ever been released as a single. Yet when Capital Radio DJ Kenny Everett played it 14 times in two days, EMI commissioned the now legendary video, based on images from photographer Mick Rock's iconic session with the band from the previous year.

The result was not just the biggest hit of the year, but the biggest hit – certainly the most memorable – in British music history up to that point. One that perfectly encapsulated everything that we now think of when we think of Queen: rock grandeur, pop camp, multi-tracked musical ostentation, works-on-many-levels lyrical imagery, fun, frisson, 'you must be fucking joking', 'no I'm fucking not' genius. All wrapped up in a song that would later be revealed as surprisingly autobiographical.

For someone who appeared supremely confident, the truth is that by 1975 Freddie was in a mental and emotional quandary. Although he'd been in a loving relationship with boutique owner Mary Austin since before Queen, he'd been experimenting with men since he was at boarding school. Still living with Mary at the time he wrote *Bohemian Rhapsody*, but now also involved with music publisher David Minns, Freddie had also increasingly begun to enjoy casual gay sex on the road.

As Brian May later explained to me: "The subject of Freddie's sexuality never came up. Basically, because none of us had any idea that he might be different from us. Is that saying it the right way? I mean, we shared lots of flats and stuff, and I've seen Freddie disappear into rooms with lots of girls and screams would emerge, so, you know, we assumed that everything was fairly much the same way as we knew it. It was only later that we realised there was anything else going on with Freddie. We were on tour in the States, and suddenly he's got boys following him into a hotel room instead of girls. We're thinking: 'Hmmm…' And that's about the extent of it. Even then, obviously, it was never a problem. I always had plenty of gay friends, I just didn't realise that Freddie was one of them until much later." ▷

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Another day, another iconic stage outfit. Freddie's harlequin 'unitard' was apparently inspired by costumes worn by the legendary ballet dancer Nijinsky in *Carnaval* in 1910.

Going hell for leather: Queen at Manchester Apollo, November 1979.

GETTY x2

In that context, it's easy to read the lyrics to *Bohemian Rhapsody* as a cry for help almost. Certainly a message in a bottle thrown out to sea by someone feeling isolated, confused, lost. The poor boy, confused between what's real or just fantasy: *'Because I'm easy come, easy go, little high, little low/Any way the wind blows, doesn't really matter to me…'*

None of which was easily detectable to the outside world in the mid-70s, as from this point on Queen really did take on the mantle of rock royalty. The album *A Night At The Opera* emulated the daring and sophisticated splendour of its most famous track, and became just as big a hit in its own realm, their first UK No.1, their first multi-platinum top-five hit in the US, and gold and platinum stop-offs around the world.

From hereon in, everything about Queen would be defined in epic proportions. Not just the success – all of their albums followed *A Night At The Opera* into the upper reaches of the world's charts, as did most of their singles, all the way up to *The Game* in 1980, which hit No. 1 in both Britain and America, their last to do so – but also the manner of that success, the sheer scale of their endeavours. Not just the increasingly over-the-top songs, but also the videos, live shows, album launch parties and of course the personal lifestyles of the band.

The infamous launch party in New Orleans in 1978 for the *Jazz* album featured a guest list of 500: rock and film stars, street freaks and media loyalists; oysters, lobster, the finest caviar, champagne; dwarves serving cocaine from trays strapped to their heads; contortionists, fire-eaters, drag queens, naked dancers in cages suspended from the ceiling; grand marble toilets 'serviced' by prostitutes of both sexes. "Most hotels offer their guests room service," Freddie giggled. "This one offers them lip service."

When the 1979 single *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* went to No.1 in America Freddie that boasted it had taken him just 10 minutes to write, doing an Elvis impersonation while lying in a bubble bath snorting cocaine in his £1,000-a-night suite at the Bayerischer Hof Hotel in Munich. As you do.

Ironically, the bigger and more ostentatious became the Queen *modus operandi,* the more they were accused of being hollow, preposterous, inalienable. Yet nobody mocked Queen more than Freddie Mercury. "Of course, dear," he told one writer. "We're wonderfully shallow. Our songs are like Bic razors – designed for mass consumption and instantly disposable."

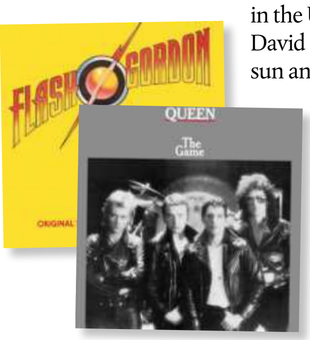
Teased about the elaborate stage productions they now toured with, Freddie laughed and said: "We're the most preposterous band that's ever lived."

"Although he took his work incredibly seriously, there was always that element of self-parody in Freddie."

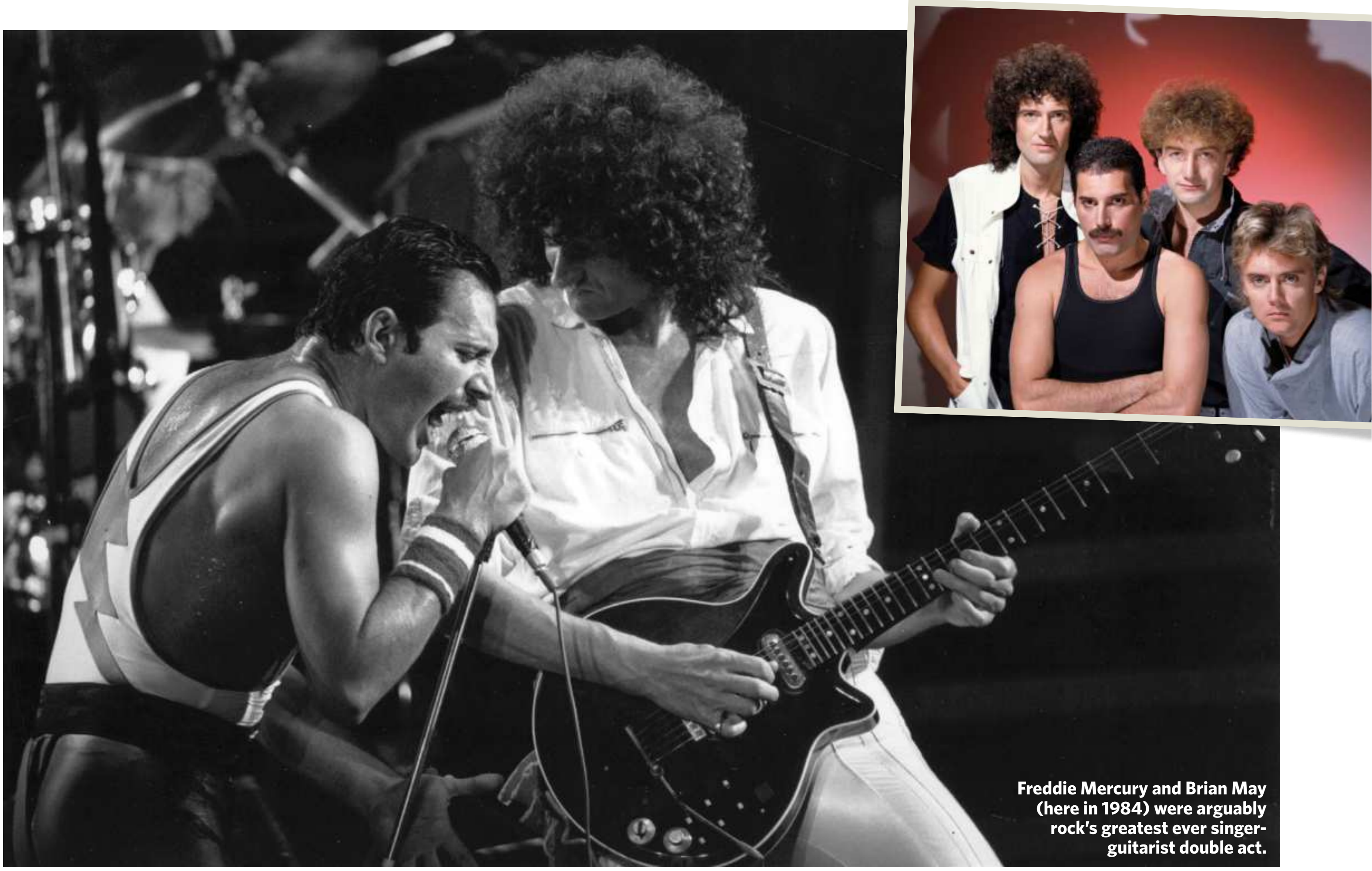
Brian May

As Brian May told me: "The most popular misconception of people outside the people who 'get it', is that [Freddie] took himself seriously. [They] didn't understand that although he took his work incredibly seriously, there was always that element of self-parody, if you like, in Freddie. He was always slightly tongue-in-cheek; there was always a little twinkle in his eye. I think that's what was missed by the outside world. It never mattered to Freddie, though, it never bothered him. It was like, they either get it or they don't."

Such hubris reaps its own bitter rewards, of course. And just as Queen seemed like they couldn't get any higher – *Another One Bites The Dust* (written by John Deacon) from *The Game* became their second No.1 hit in the US, followed a year later by their only UK No.1 of the 80s, their David Bowie collaboration *Under Pressure* – they finally flew close to the sun and badly singed their wings. They didn't make it public, but by the end of making *The Game* Queen had all but broken up.



"Yes, we all walked out at various times," May admitted. "You get hard times, as in any relationship. We definitely did. Usually in the studio; never on tour. On tour you always have a clear, common aim. But in the studio you're all pulling in different directions and it can be very frustrating. You only get twenty-five per cent of your own way at the best of times. So, yes, we



GETTY

Freddie Mercury and Brian May (here in 1984) were arguably rock's greatest ever singer-guitarist double act.

did have hard times. Feeling that you're not being represented, that you're not being heard. Because that's one of the things about being a musician, you want to be heard. You want your ideas to be out there. You want to be able to explore what's coming to you in the way of inspiration. It was a difficult compromise to find, but always worth finding once you did find it."

Speaking nearly 20 years later, John Deacon put it more simply: "Once we'd achieved that level and been successful in so many countries in the world, it took away some of the incentive."

The bottom of the barrel arrived with their 1982 album *Hot Space*. After a decade at the top, Queen had demonstrated more versatility than any group since The Beatles. It seemed they could do anything, not just bring opera to the charts – opera, dude! – but also Aretha-soul (*Somebody To Love*), effervescent pop (*Don't Stop Me Now*), music hall (*Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy*), rockabilly (*Crazy Little Thing Called Love*), heartland rock (*Fat Bottomed Girls*), Chic-style funk pop (*Another One Bites The Dust*)… With *Hot Space* they decided they could do disco.

"Freddie and John definitely shared an interest in exploring that funk direction," said May. "I remember Roger's first reaction to *Another One Bites The Dust*, which was unprintable! But he got into it in the end. And I make no apologies for the *Hot Space* album. I was well into it at the time. It took me a while to get into that philosophy of sparseness but it was very good for us, it was a good discipline and it got us out of a rut and into a new place."

"I make no apologies for the *Hot Space* album. It got us out of a rut and into a new place."

Brian May

The trouble was, disco had already been done to death, and only recently. By releasing the single *Body Language*, a sleek, highly impressive electro-disco bump'n'grind, they had alighted on the form just as rap and soon-to-be hip-hop had reinvented the genre. But Freddie couldn't see it. Now living in New York and a nightly habitué of the small-hours gay and S&M clubs where such music writhed and thrived, it wasn't just the almost suffocating sounds of the tightly wound turntables he sought to emulate, it was the whole limb-tangled scene.

Not only had 'rock' band Queen abandoned their musical foundation stones, also their singer had cut his hair butch-short and grown one of the moustaches that characterised the after-dark scene he now called home.

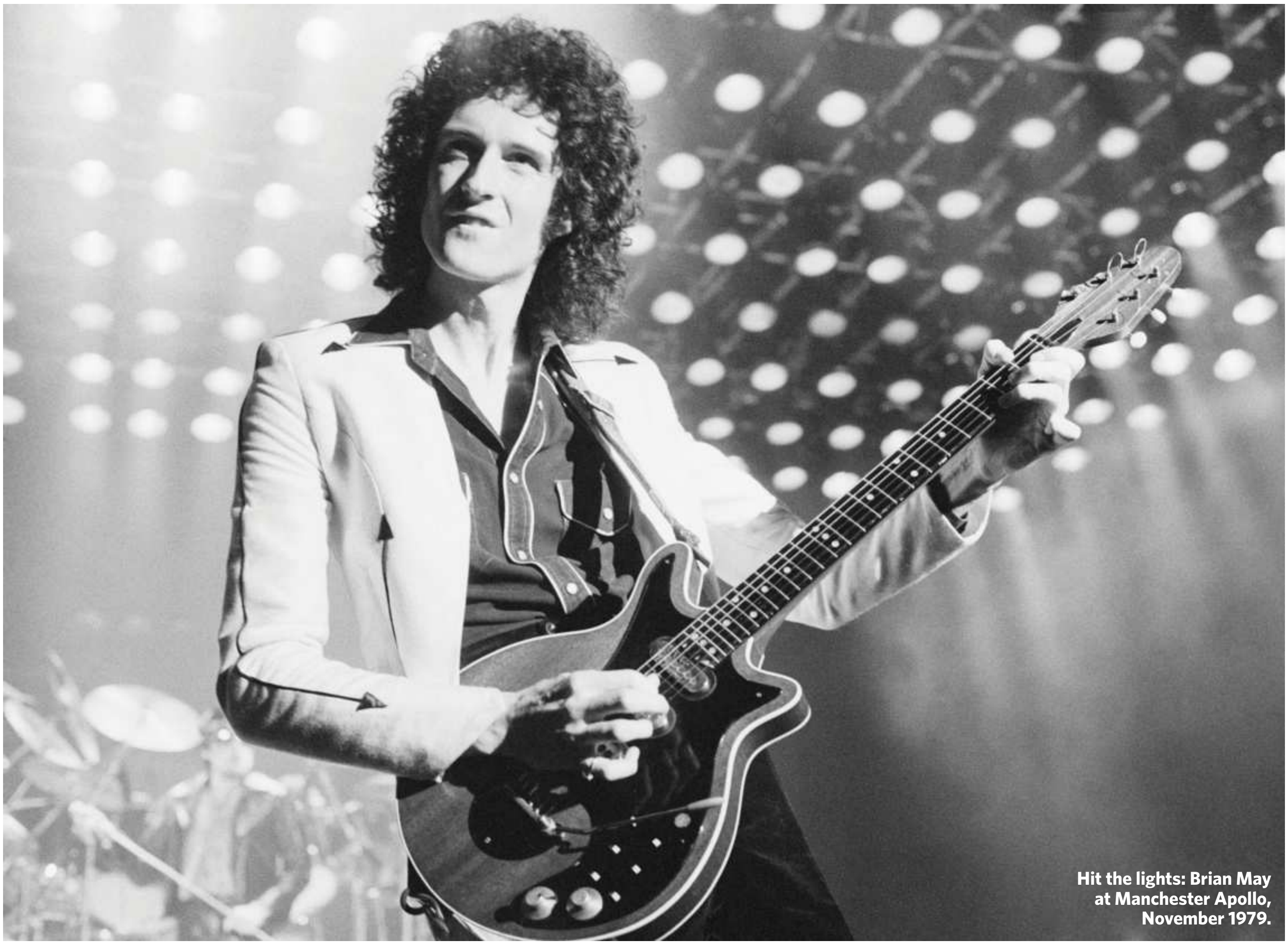
Freddie's change of image from svelte 70s rock star to short-haired and moustachioed pop diva was the moment when Queen's career in America began to tank.

"I think there's a grain of truth in that, but there was a lot more going on, a number of factors," May insists. "One of the factors was the video for *I Want To Break Free*. We're talking about a bit later now, but I know that that was received with horror in the greater part of America. Because they just didn't get the joke, you know. To them it was boys dressing up as girls and it was unthinkable, especially for a rock band. I was actually in some of those TV stations when they got the thing and a lot of them refused to play it. They were visibly embarrassed about having to deal with it. So that was one factor."

He also cited the band's switch of US label in the early 80s: "We had spent a million dollars getting out of the Warner-Elektra deal to get on to the Capitol label. And Capitol got themselves into a heap of trouble with [a dispute that raged in the early 80s over the alleged corruption of independent record promoters in the US]. It was basically the ring of bribery that [went] on to get records played [on US radio]. There was a government enquiry into it and everybody shut down very, very fast.

"Without going into it too deeply, Capitol got rid of all their 'independent' guys, and the reprisals from the whole network were aimed directly at all the artists who had records out at that time. We had *Radio Ga-Ga* out, which I think was number thirty and rising, and the week after that it disappeared from the charts completely. We got caught up in all that due to no fault of our own."

Mercury, as ever, affected not to care, as if nothing really mattered. Queen toured South America instead of North America. "Japan and Europe also became a huge thing for us. Eastern Europe opened up. And we were not seen for quite a long time in the States, due to a combination of all the ▷



TOP: GETTY; BOTTOM: ALAMY

Hit the lights: Brian May at Manchester Apollo, November 1979.

circumstances that I've described. Plus the fact that Freddie didn't want to go back smaller than we'd been before. He was like: 'Let's just wait, and then soon we'll go out and we'll do stadiums in America as well.' Only of course we never did."

For the Queen traditionalists – and there were still many millions of them – the release of *The Works,* in 1984, was an unexpected joy. To call it a return to form would be unjust. It was another move forward, just less deliberately weird than its much-derided predecessor. The electronics were there not just to unbalance expectations, but, as in royal days of yore, to become another Queen-endorsed part of the overall musical majesty.

Radio Ga Ga, written by Taylor, was a giant hit, heralding what appeared to be a new chapter in the ever-unfolding story of Queen. Even better, though, was *I Want To Break Free,* with its gorgeous loping rhythm that John Deacon had again come up with, and blissfully muted synth solo, played by the great Fred Mandel, the first significant extracurricular musician ever to appear on a Queen record. The video was a hoot, of course, with its cringingly short skirts, crooked women's wigs, badly drawn lippy and droopy cigarettes. The track was fabulous, joyous and, when listened to alone, away from the hoovering video, a wonderfully fully realised demand for the one thing rock music was originally invented to champion: the freedom to be oneself, whoever the hell that might be, when no one else is looking.

"There was always this great challenge of how far can we push things in any direction."

Brian May

A few years later I attended the funeral of Brian Munns, the brilliant EMI press officer who had attended Queen's career through thick and thin. I was deeply moved to discover he had requested that *I Want To Break Free* be played as his coffin was ushered into the flames of the crematorium. By then Freddie was dead too, but to hear him crooning *'It's strange but it's true/I can't get over the way you love me like you do'* brought a happy tear to the eye. For Freddie and Brian, for all of us.

I also recalled the harsh criticism that news that Queen had been added to the Live Aid bill had engendered among my colleagues on the so-called free press. And how none of it really mattered by the time Freddie, Brian, John and Roger took Wembley and the world by storm that summer.

When, exactly 20 years later, I asked Brian May what he would list as Freddie Mercury's greatest attributes as live performer, apart, of course, from that fantastic four-octave voice, he replied: "I suppose that combination of such daring and audacity, but also a great vulnerability as well."

Isn't that what made them Queen, though, that ability to be something more than just a rock band?

"Well, that's very kind of you," he said. "It's true that to us there were no boundaries. Alongside trying to never tread the same ground twice, there was always this great challenge of how far can we push things in any direction."

And on those several occasions when they went too far?

"You'd have to ask Freddie."

GETTY

Queen at Live Aid: watched by 72,000 people in the stadium and a global TV audience of 1.9 billion.

"WE HAD A DESIRE TO CREATE SOMETHING EXTRAORDINARY"

In 1973, **Queen** released the album that would define their sound, capture their grand ambition and vindicate their unshakeable self-belief. This is the story of *Queen II* and the *real* birth of the legend.

Words: **Jon Hotten**
Portraits: **Mick Rock**

"For a long time it was my favourite Queen album. It got overtaken by *Made In Heaven*, which I think is, strangely enough, perhaps the deepest Queen album, because we did it after Freddie had gone, but I've always loved that record. In a sense it was the biggest jump we ever made creatively."

It says something about Brian May that he seizes the phone so enthusiastically to begin talking about *Queen II*, a record he made more than half a lifetime ago. He has excused himself from one meeting, and has another to attend immediately afterwards. Cheerful,

PHOTO COPYRIGHT MICK ROCK 1974, 2019

thoughtful and engaged by the subject, it is only the next morning that Queen's guitarist and co-founder will post on his blog (on which he can be as irascible in print as he is charming in person) that he had been waiting for a call from his specialist for the results of a series of tests for cancer. It would come at six that evening, and it brought the best kind of news. May, who lost his father to the disease at 66 was given the all-clear; the pain in his lower back is something far less sinister.

For fans of Queen, a band trapped in the imagination as somehow ageless, their music a constant, their image maintained in perpetuity by their videos and concert films, it's difficult to conceive of them becoming old. But even despite the electrified, eternally youthful glow of the baby-boomer generation, May and his bandmate Roger Taylor are mortal men, now in the middle of their seventh decades.

There is a distance now between them and the story that they have agreed to tell, and much has happened in between. When they speak about themselves during the making of *Queen II*, it's with an amused detachment, almost as if they were discussing the antics of their teenage grandchildren. The details of any rabble-rousing misbehaviour have been lost to time, and probably discretion too. The act of hedonism that remains in the memory is the creative binge that allowed them to put down on tape the sounds that they had been carrying around in their heads since the concept of Queen became to them. All of their excess came out on the record; it was that, rather than sex, drugs and rock'n'roll madness, that consumed them and drove them forwards.

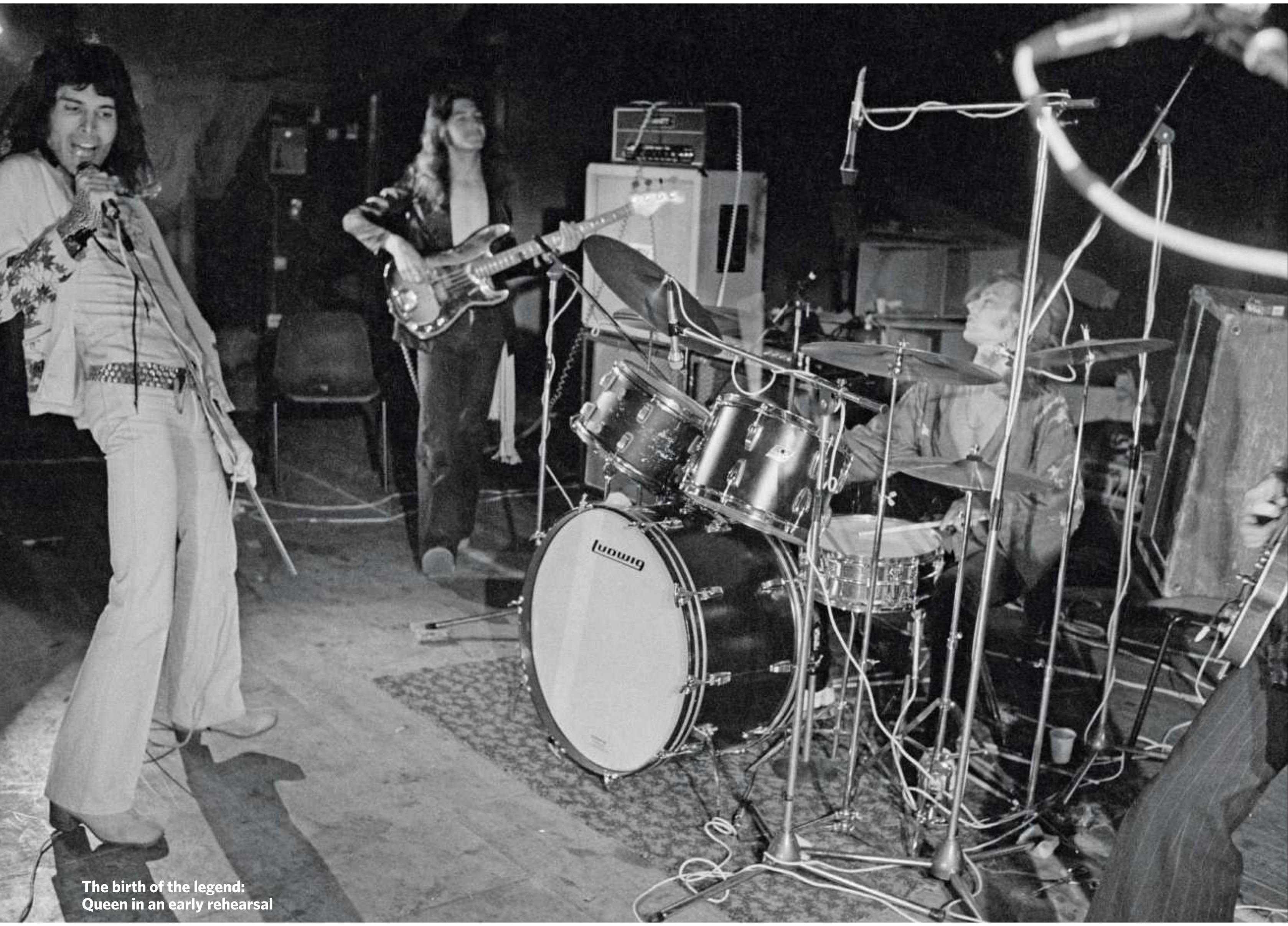
In its bombastically glorious sound, its sonic grandeur, its sometimes hilarious excesses, *Queen II* is the record that pointed the way to the band that they would become. From a cover shot in homage to Marlene Dietrich, to its themed sides of 'White' and 'Black', unfettered ambition runs through it. Forty years later, it retains a gobsmacking appeal. It really is quite something.

"I don't think the album sounds like anyone else," says Roger Taylor, sitting in a shaded corner of his studio on a bright winter's day in deepest Surrey. "We weren't really at that point like anyone else… we gained a mental identity, a group identity and we were just doing what we did."

Casually but expensively dressed, softly spoken and instinctively well mannered, it would be easy enough to mistake the drummer for the successful dental surgeon that in a more conventional life he would have become. Instead he has been Queen's most conventional rock star: an androgynous beauty in his youth, it was Taylor who loved sports cars and dated models; who brought his rasping rock'n'roll voice to the many layers that would characterise Queen's sound; who will say even now, after the decades of hit singles and chart success, that he considers Queen to be "an albums band".

"I remember *Queen II* clearly because it was such a formative period," he begins. "Things were just starting to crystalise. The first album was made very much in spare studio time. *Queen II* was more of a piece, rather than just being songs thrown on to an album, which is what the first one was. We were really starting to push the boundaries of the studio in terms of overdubbing, and what we could do vocally, which we were really just tinkering with before that. We really realised that we had a lot of vocal power, and things we could do with vocals. There was a lot of very complex stuff on there."

"We were far too strong-willed ever to be told what to do."
Roger Taylor



The birth of the legend: Queen in an early rehearsal

The early 1970s are a distant place now, another country, and 1974 was particularly colourless and grim: the year of two general elections, the three-day week, a state of emergency in Northern Ireland, the Birmingham pub bombings. Germany existed as two halves, East and West. Leonid Brezhnev led the USSR. Richard Nixon resigned as US President after Watergate. Lord Lucan vanished. The man in the street had never seen a computer, the majority of British households still had black-and-white televisions.

In that grey world with few distractions, rock'n'roll exerted its pull. Bon Scott joined AC/DC, Neil Peart became Rush's drummer, Yes sold out Madison Square Garden, Genesis released *The Lamb Lies Down On Broadway*, Deep Purple put out *Burn* and *Stormbringer*, Kiss and Bad Company unleashed their debut albums; punk was still two years away.

Queen didn't quite fit in anywhere. Music for them was not an escape from the dead end of the streets. Roger Taylor had qualified as a dentist, Brian May was a physics graduate, bassist John Deacon read electronics, and Zanzibar-born Freddie 'Mercury' Bulsara was a former art and graphic design student. From the start they had a grand artistic vision that came from art and poetry. They had something in common with the public schoolboys playing prog rock, they shared an aesthetic with the arty, New York side of glam, they wanted to write hit singles. Yet they still stood slightly apart: they were headstrong, self-confident, self-contained, perhaps not that easy to love.

Taylor and May had met first, and played together, in the band Smile. There, as Taylor puts it, Mercury became "not our hanger-on, that's unfair…" He searches for the right description. "Our friend. He was our friend. And then Freddie and I became very close."

Taylor and Mercury bonded over clothes, May and Mercury over a love of Jimi Hendrix. The Mercury of 1973 was still the "emergent butterfly" of his own description, and his personality bore contrasting sides of deep shyness disguised with an equally innate flamboyance. He had a deep need for his own reinvention, and said that he wished his life to that point had begun at age 21 in Feltham. He could play almost any song by ear at the piano, had been calling male and female alike darling since the age of 12, and he was creating a persona that somehow exaggerated his sexuality and theatricality while allowing him to keep it private until almost the very end of his life.

"You weren't allowed to be outwardly ambitious in those days, It was a culture of envy."
Roger Taylor

It was Mercury who coined the band's eventual name. "I've got it in a diary entry," Taylor recalls. "'I've decided the best name for the band is Queen…' Up until then we were going to call it Build Your Own Boat." The name 'Queen' bore the Mercury hallmark – it could be interpreted in different ways, both regal and provocative.

When they came to make their debut album, they were living in various flats and bedsits. May was doing some part-time teaching, Taylor and

Mercury ran a clothes stall in Kensington Market. They recorded in cheap studio down-time when no one else was there, and so the album had been a piecemeal affair, unable to live up to the vision of the band that was evolving. The *NME* called it "a bucket of stale urine". Queen sat uneasily between Bowie and Roxy Music on one hand, and Led Zeppelin and their ilk on the other (Roxy Music's drummer called them "contrived"; the untouchable Zeppelin didn't call them anything at all). Without the grandeur that Queen's music needed, all their posing and preening, the eyeliner and the painted nails and the platform boots made them look like wannabes, followers, and they were very far from that.

What they did possess was a rock-solid self-confidence that enabled them to catch the bus to the studio in their stage gear, and to hire their own publicist, Tony Brainsby (it was he who ensured that just before they began *Queen II*, they appeared in the pages of *Mirabelle* magazine, May giving his likes as "cats, Herman Hesse and prawn cocktails", Mercury confessing that his ambition was "to appear on *The Liza Minelli Show*").

They were also caught up in an unconventional and complex recording contact. The band had originally been signed by Norman and Barry Sheffield, two brothers who owned Trident Studios in the heart of London's Soho, the use of which was the bait in the deal. Queen had a separate publishing contract with a company that was taken over by EMI, and it edged them closer to a deal there. By the time they came to start *Queen II*, EMI had bought them out of the Trident contract, and yet the band retained an unusual autonomy. They fought hard for proper studio time, and refused the input of EMI's A&R department. "We were far too strong-willed ever to be told what to do," Taylor admits.

The first record had allowed them to forge a working partnership with Trident's in-house producer Roy Thomas Baker and his engineer Mike Stone. Crucially, Baker had begun his career at Decca, where he learned how to record classical music. When May began multi-tracking his guitars, and the band produced vast and complicated vocal arrangements, he knew exactly how to get it on tape.

"We wanted it to be big and grand," says Taylor. "It sounds tremendously unfashionable now, but yeah, that's what we wanted."

MICHAEL PUTLAND/GETTY X2

Black Queen: a sit-down moment during their march to the very top

In August 1973, Queen made their way down Wardour Street to St Anne's Court and Trident's tiny studios. They were in possession of a month's worth of daylight-hours recording time, and they were determined to make an album that matched their high opinion of their own talents (just before they began, Taylor told *Record Mirror* that the record would be alright "if we can keep our egos under control"). They were familiar with Trident from their first record, and the experience hadn't been wholly positive.

"I wasn't happy with my drum sound ," says Taylor of *Queen I*. "Trident was famous for this very dead drum sound which was very in vogue at the time. All of Elton's records had it. Bowie's records too had that very dead, dry drum sound. I wanted something much liver. With the second record it was starting to get where I wanted it to be."

Taylor's concerns with the minutia of sound were typical. The vision was grand, but it wasn't broad-brush; attention to detail would become the central feature. Although a month seems like a very little time period to make a record lavished with such care, to Queen it was a much greater opportunity than any they had been afforded to date.

One of the drummer's first memories is of May building *Procession*, the instrumental section that opens the record (although he briefly forgets what it's called). "He was in this corner just going over and over it…"

Although the sessions were supposed to be daytime ones, Taylor recalls several all-nighters too. Nothing was left to chance. One of Mercury's first acts was to strong-arm Roy Thomas Baker down to the Tate Museum to see Richard Dadd's painting *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, which had inspired the singer to write an appropriately airy song of the same name.

"Really it was like uncorking the bottle," recalls May. "We'd made the first album using lots of studio downtime, and it was a real mess, basically. Finally we were in there and had full use of everything and we had the chance to use everything as we wanted. We had a little more clout, finally. We went in very interactively with Roy. So it was like being a painter but for the first time having the full palette to work with."

"It was very early days, of course, and John wasn't writing, or at least he wasn't showing us what he was writing," May says. "Roger was in the very early stages. He was in a space all of his own, so his track [*The Loser In the End*] in a sense is in a slightly different space on the album. Freddie and I were interacting quite a bit. We had a lot of discussions about the fantasies we'd had about what we could do as far as constructing an album. The whole idea of the Black and the White sides, the references to queens in various forms, all that stuff had been in our heads for quite a long time. It really was amazing to go in there and bring it to life with all of that overdubbing. We were charging down the road of voices and orchestrating and all of that was a dream come true. It had been in our heads for so long, and finally we were able to make it happen."

The songs that May and Mercury had written were fantastical, romantic, otherworldly, designed in their themes and melodies to be recorded in a

> ***"We were trying to squeeze a whole world on to two grooves of vinyl."***
> **Brian May**

particular way. The influences were many and varied: *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* came from Dadd's painting ("If you look at it, it's so complex, with many layers, which is what Freddie was trying to turn into sound," says May); *White Queen (As It Began)* from a Graves poem that May projected onto a girl he'd known at college; *Procession*, *Father To Son*, *The March Of The Black Queen* and *Ogre Battle* were more of the same, huge tunes that demanded excess. Baker had his instructions from Mercury: "Anything you want to try, throw it in."

"I suppose we came from an unusual place. I always thought we were very lucky in what we were exposed to as kids," May says of the ideas that thrum through the songs. "In those days there wasn't really a rock world, we were exposed to everything that was around. There weren't many TV channels, there weren't many radio stations. You got drenched in everything and had a very broad introduction to life and art. What we expressed was something quite personal, but it was fed by the art that we'd been exposed to. A massive spectrum of stuff, Mantovani to the *Thunder And Lightning* polka to Beethoven to Tchaikovsky to music hall to traditional jazz, it was really incredibly wide."

One of Taylor's abiding memories is of the hours that they invested in every moment of sound. "We must have worked our arses off," he says. "We did work very hard because of the massive amounts of vocals. And we used things like harpsichords and piano with tacks in the hammers. I used a strange military snare drum. It is an experimental record. We used backwards tape for the first time. Brian used some backwards tape, I think. It's quite hard to do. And he was an absolute perfectionist with his multi-track guitar. He's also a very good harmonies person, and you need to be almost a mathematician. It's never what you think it will be, and it's not simple. He was very much a perfectionist, and I did used to marvel, and sometimes become exasperated, by how long he took to do something."

The 16-track technology was precarious and Queen were pushing towards its limits. "We would construct different parts of the overall picture and then bounce them down onto the stereo," says May. "And you couldn't really save the pre-bounced situation. We weren't at the point of having slaves [copies of the master recording] at that time. We'd bounce something down, a lot of those vocal parts, and you could never go back and re-balance, you had to stick with what you got on the stereo. 'Hair-raising' is the word."

In the midst of it was Baker, whose own quirks were beginning to tell. He loved excess as much as the band did, and described what he was doing with them as "kitchen-sink over-production". He saw the humour inherent in it. Yet Taylor recalls an element of complexity for its own sake.

"It's difficult with Roy," he says. "He did have a great knowledge of the studio, and he'd worked on the Mark Bolan stuff, which sounded great. He was good fun, he was a bon viveur, which sat very well with us. But he could be quite unforgiving. Sometimes we'd do countless takes for little reason that I could see. It was Roy pretending to be a perfectionist."

They were finished in a month. Which, given the complexity of *Queen II*, proves their rapacious appetite for work. Brian May can recall the moments in which he realised that they had something.

"There's a place somewhere in the middle of *Father To Son* – I think it's the beginning of the second verse – when suddenly the whole of the army of guitars kicks in. And that, to me… I remember hearing that back – and I'm not even sure how many guitars are on there, probably double figures – and for the first time, I heard that guitar orchestra coming back at me, and it was what I'd dreamed of since I'd heard Jeff Beck doing *Hi Ho Silver Lining*. That's what I wanted, in my head. There's a moment in *Black Queen* when something similar happens with the voices. They're all being punched in, and it's just these cascading guitars. It's like Mantovani – I don't know if anyone knows who Mantovani is any more, but that kind of bell cascade effect was in the minds of both Freddie and I. I did it with guitars, and Freddie and Mike Stone did it with voices, actually punching them in from the desk. Suddenly you realise there are what seems like thousands of voices coming at you from all sides."

"We wanted to make it big," agrees Taylor. "We wanted to test the studio to show ourselves how far we could go. There are a couple of tracks – *Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke*, which isn't the greatest mix, but technically and vocally it's incredibly complex with these massed ranks of harmonies overlapping one another. It was a complex piece of music. The album really came from three years of being forged by hard work of rehearsal, playing together, working together," he says. "We all had our various influences, many of which are the same, and with our four personalities that's what came out. Freddie was fairly dominant in his writing at that point. He was the one writing the very complicated stuff. It's just the way his brain worked. He was on fire, really."

The finished record has a structure that wasn't apparent while it was being made. As principal writers, May and Mercury had produced, in the old money, a side of music each, although they weren't separated as such until the final tracklisting was compiled after recording was finished.

What's striking is how much they shared: *White Queen (As It Began)* and *The March Of The Black Queen* share a romance that was encoded deep in their baroque structures, and both May, on *Father To Son*, and Mercury with *Nevermore* were almost, in Taylor's description, "soppy". Although the music was grand and many of the lyrics gothic and fantastical, there was a deeply sentimental streak running through Queen that would continue throughout their career, from *A Night At The Opera*'s grand ballad *Love Of My Life* to their 1991 swansong *Those Were The Days Of Our Lives*.

Almost everything on *Queen II* threw out threads that connected Queen to their own future, even as they prepared to leave some of the excesses behind. In the massed choirs of vocals on *Father To Son* and *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* lay the seeds of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. The overwhelming heaviness of *Ogre Battle* and *The March Of The Black Queen* predate *Brighton Rock*, *Sheer Heart Attack*, *We Will Rock You* and *Death On Two Legs* (perhaps the only Queen album that approaches *Queen II* in terms of out and out heavy rock is 1979's in-concert tour de force *Live Killers*).

Queen II also marked Queen out as a band who could write hit singles. Their first attempt, *Keep Yourself Alive*, had flopped the previous year. This time there would be no mistake. Tucked away at the end of the album, *Seven Seas Of Rhye* was a pocket epic that referenced both Greek mythology and British seaside humour. Crucially, the band wrote it specifically to be a hit. "Everything including the kitchen sink got thrown at that," says May. "'Pressure' isn't the right term, it was more: we would like to have our single played on the radio, so let's not give them any excuse not to." Released in February 1974, a fortnight ahead of its parent album, *Seven Seas Of Rhye* peaked at No.10 in the UK chart – the first in an astonishing run of 46 Top 40 singles.

This desire to have everything planned to the finest detail, to not leave anything to chance, was ingrained deep into *Queen II*.

"We were trying to squeeze a whole world into two grooves of vinyl," says May. "It is unusual, and we made it unusual. We made a U-turn afterwards, and the *Sheer Heart Attack* album [recorded just a few months later and also released in 1974] is very linear, it's really not very textured at all. *Sheer Heart Attack* has a constantly moving focus that is very clear, whereas *Queen II* has an immensity you can drench yourself in."

Queen II was about more than the sum of its parts. There was a wider aesthetic imagination at work in its use of White and Black for the individual sides, and the recurring themes of queens and, as Taylor calls it "faery – with a 'e'.

"It was meant to be a lifestyle, almost," he says. "We liked the idea. We put the sort of… most of the complicated stuff on the Black, or the dark side, and most of the lighter stuff on the White. It was a sort of concept in a way, but a very vague one. People would paint their nails white on one hand and black on the other. It was great to see the shock on airline staff's faces when they saw a guy had his nails painted. And the fact we wore outrageously, some would say, effeminate clothes. And we had the sleeve black and the inside sleeve white, and so on. That's what we wore on stage, only black and white. It was a nice contrast and the most effective with lights. We didn't wear jeans on stage. Ever."

Housed in sleeve with a Mick Rock photograph – a single, top-lit image recreated from a photo of Mercury's heroine Marlene Dietrich – that would later form the basis for the *Bohemian Rhapsody* video, *Queen II* was released on March 8, 1974. Reviews were mixed, much to the band's chagrin. ➜

"Please God make us successful some day, one day..."

PHOTO COPYRIGHT MICK ROCK 1974, 2019

"You've come rather under-dressed, darling..." Freddie Mercury on the way to being arguably rock's greatest frontman.

PHOTO COPYRIGHT MICK ROCK 1974, 2019

> ***"Freddie had this tremendous drive. He'd always say: 'Don't worry, dears, talent will out.'"***
> ***Roger Taylor***

Damning with faint praise, *Rolling Stone* applauded 'Side White' as "rather pretty", while *Record Mirror* called it "the dregs of glam rock". More bemusingly, *Creem* called it "wimpoid" and *Melody Maker* said it had "no depth of sound".

"They did affect us," says Taylor. "We became immune after a while, because we just thought, fuck you, we're indestructible. But they did affect us. And we worked very hard to produce an interesting, very intricate, undeniably quite advanced record. I can't remember what they said, but yeah, it pissed us off, really. You weren't allowed to be outwardly ambitious in those days. Which is stupid. A very English thing, a culture of envy. It's a very strange take the English have. And there was an element of comedy in it, really."

"I think we had a shared sense of humour that was very precious, looking back on it," says May. "We had a way of dealing with the world. Because you find yourself under a lot of attack, and the sense of humour very often did tide us through. Strangely enough, I felt along the way that it was Freddie's sense of humour that was underestimated. I don't think they realised how much he was willing take the piss out of himself. He had a great ability to view himself in a light way – 'It's just fish-and-chip paper, darling.' He was the first person to put himself down, rather smartly, as he was regarded as being rather pompous initially. That was a complete misunderstanding. He was very much aware of the persona he was creating."

ueen managed to distill the dense mass of ideas down into songs that were playable live. They trialled stripped-back versions of *The March Of the Black Queen*, *Ogre Battle*, *Father To Son* and *Seven Seas Of Rhye* in a warm-up show at Golders Green Hippodrome which was recorded by the BBC, before going out on tour with Mott The Hoople, marking the first time that EMI had ever stumped up a buy-on fee for one of their acts – anywhere between £3,000 and £10,000 depending on who you ask. Despite Mott's initial amusement at seeing Queen turn up for a rehearsal in full stage clobber, the bands gelled well both on stage, where Queen's heavy, gothic rock offered a nice contrast to Mott's good-time glam, and off. The bands travelled on a coach together. Mott's pianist Morgan Fisher (who would later tour with Queen as a keyboard player) remembers them as "obsessed with their work and needing bringing out of themselves".

"Touring was very different then," Taylor says. "The hotels were shit in this country. All you had was the Trust House Forte. And you might get a sandwich from the night porter. We learned a bit off Mott. When we got to America the Holiday Inns seemed so luxurious. We weren't a screamers band, but we used to throw open backstage to anyone who wants to come and have a drink – there would be hundreds of people. It was fun.

"We nicked a lot of ideas about staging from Mott too. Very simple ideas now, but about the dynamics. Ian [Hunter] was very good at that, and Mott were a good time rock'n'roll band. We'd give 'em a run for their money. We only did about half an hour, and *Liar* was probably eight minutes… we'd just do a few more powerful songs and go off – hopefully get an encore. I think Ian wasn't sure whether to allow it."

They didn't always get one. Taylor remembers responses being mixed, "one night good and then maybe one not so good". In part that was due to the collision between the band's deliberate and challenging androgeny and the rougher crowds of the era. The leotards and nail polish were bearable in a support act, the high-camp version of Shirley Bassey's *Hey Big Spender* that they insisted on playing perhaps less so. Sometimes it was too much, even for a natural show-off like Mercury.

In Liverpool, he fretted over what to say to the audience. He settled on "Nice one, Kevin", a football reference he'd found in the *Liverpool Echo,* which brought a pleasing eruption of supportive laughter. At Birmingham Town Hall, Mercury was told to "Fucking get off, ya cunt…" by a heckler before he'd even opened his mouth, and he was later hit by a hot dog thrown from the stalls. Yet the tour's final shows, at Hammersmith Odeon, were two of their finest and best-received. Brian's mother and father were in the audience for the second, and were bemused to find themselves signing autographs. Queen ended the run of shows convinced that the next time they toured the UK it would be as the headline act.

There followed a bemusing trip to Australia, where the band were badly mis-booked for a festival in Melbourne. The Sunbury Rock Festival bill was mostly the heads-down Aussie pub rockers of the day – Buster Brown, Daddy Cool, Madder Lake – who brought their own followings along. Queen

White Queen: always dressed with a style and flamboyance that matched their music.

"Roy Thomas Baker said: 'What if it's a flop?' I said: 'It's not going to be a flop'."

Roger Taylor

PHOTO COPYRIGHT MICK ROCK 1974, 2014

The Black Queen: Freddie Mercury in his pomp in 1973.

> **"It sounds tremendously unfashionable now, but we wanted it to be big and grand."**
> *Brian May*

insisted on their own lighting rig, raising local hackles, and then got into a row with Madder Lake over their spot on the bill. "Do you want these pommie bastards, or do you want an Aussie rock band?" the announcer asked the crowd. Queen were said to have been booed off stage, although this remains disputed. There were certainly catcalls when Mercury announced that the next time Queen came to Australia they would be "the biggest band in the world". Taylor recalls little about the show, but remembers the two Mercedes that they travelled around in, much to the disgust of the locals. "Freddie loved it, of course. It was tremendous fun."

It was all short-lived. By July they were back in the studio making the *Sheer Heart Attack* album. It came out in November 1974, at which point they had already begun recording *A Night At The Opera*. The sound of both records had its genesis in *Queen II*.

Four decades later, Queen have achieved a kind of mainstream ubiquity that their near-contemporaries have not. There is no Led Zeppelin musical running in the West End; the videos for Genesis's hit singles aren't voted the nation's favourites; there has been no invitation for Pete Townshend to play the National Anthem on the roof of Buckingham Palace.

Queen have not been together in their original form since Freddie Mercury's death 23 years ago, and the four became two in 1997 when John Deacon retired from the music business and withdrew from public life. They've performed with George Michael, Axl Rose, Paul Rodgers and, today, Adam Lambert as their singers, maintaining throughout a sense of heritage and continuity and occasion that has eluded other bands that have lost key members. The awareness of their name and music penetrates deep into the wider culture in a way that the other rock giants of the 1970s don't. Your granny knows who Queen are. In fact the Queen knows who Queen are. May and Taylor have curated a living legacy that has eluded almost every other band of their era. They stand apart from rock music and yet they are woven deep into its history.

Of all of their records, it is *Queen II* that many fans and musicians point to as a defining moment not only for Queen, but also for how heavy rock music could sound. Axl Rose, Billy Corgan and Steve Vai have each claimed the album as an influence, and such is its depth, it's possible to hear elements of it in their diverse work – Corgan called it "an album that changed my life", Rose said it "opened my mind", Steve Vai said hearing it was "a pivotal moment".

"I can remember discussing with Roy Baker one afternoon in the studio and him saying: "What happens if this is a flop?" recalls Taylor. " And I said: 'It's not going to be a flop'. And he said: 'But what if it is?' I said: 'Well, Roy, I don't think that's a very good way of thinking about it…' We had a lot of faith in ourselves, I don't why. Really, it was much more about musical integrity. That's what we were seeking. We didn't particularly want all the trappings. We were just thinking about what we wanted to achieve. That is something I think has changed a lot. People now want instant gratification, to be showered with Bentleys and have a house in Hollywood or Saint George's Hill. That wasn't what we were after."

What they were after – that grand and classical sound that would separate them musically – has persisted in other, different ways.

"It hasn't gone away." Brian May says. "We did have a desire, and still do, for creating something extraordinary. Creating unique moments, that can't be repeated, on record, in life, that's what excites us. We pursue those with great vigour. It might look excessive, but it's like the mountain climber, the thrill of exploring new territories."

Taylor concurs. "A lot of it was Freddie. He had this tremendous drive. He'd always say: 'Don't worry, dears, talent will out.' And I suppose it has."

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SHEER HEART ATTACK Queen

STONE CO

Under intense pressure, and with one band member in his sickbed, **Queen** still managed to record the album that laid the foundation for all the success that followed: *Sheer Heart Attack*.

Words: **Dave Everley** Pictures: **Mick Rock**

"Darling, he's *far* too busy in the studio. That's what happens when you get sick in Queen – you have to make the time up."

In the South London offices of his band's PR company, a characteristically flamboyant Freddie Mercury is entertaining the press. It's the autumn of 1974, and Queen have almost completed their third album, *Sheer Heart Attack*. Almost. For Mercury's bandmate Brian May there's still work to do. It's just a few months since the guitarist was felled by a virulent bout of hepatitis mid-way through their debut US tour, and subsequently hospitalised for a second time with a stomach ulcer, forcing him to miss initial sessions for the album. May is currently holed up in the studio, finishing off his guitar parts, hence his absence today.

It's typical of Queen's ferocious drive that they haven't let a pair of potentially fatal medical conditions get in the way of the job in hand. Their first two albums – 1973's *Queen* and follow-up *Queen II*, released earlier in 1974 – set them up as a unique proposition: one part Zeppelin-esque rockers, one part glam dandies, one part fantastical Aubrey Beardsley illustration made flesh. Their music, along with their billowing silk blouses and Mercury's outrageous, 1,000-watt personality, has earned them as much scorn as admiration. Both responses have only fuelled their ambitions.

But now those ambitions are coming into sharp focus. Like its predecessors, *Sheer Heart Attack* is the product of an intense work ethic that stems from a desire to be bigger, bolder and better than everyone else. It's a watershed for the band: this album will lay the groundwork for future success. There are solid economic factors, too. The album needs to be a success to boost their ever-decreasing finances. Their management, Trident Productions, have put them on a wage that barely pays the bills, while seeking a return on their hefty investments in recording and studio costs. Combined with May's illness, it's fair to say, there's a lot riding on it.

"The whole group aimed for the top slot," says Mercury. "We're not going to be content with anything less. That's what we're striving for. It's got to be there. I definitely know we've got it in the music, we're original enough… and, now we're proving it."

"I first met Queen in November 1973, when Mott The Hoople were rehearsing for their tour," recalls Peter Hince, thena 19-year-old Mott roadie (and laterone of the key members of Queen's crew). "We were in Manticore Studios in Fulham, a converted cinema. It was freezing cold, everyone in scarves and coats. Then Queen came in in their dresses, their silks and satin. Even then, Fred was doing the whole thing, running up and down and doing his poses. My first thought was basically, 'What a prat.'"

> **"Do we row? Oh, my dear, we're the bitchiest band on earth. We're at each other's throats."**
>
> **Freddie Mercury, 1974**

It wasn't an uncommon reaction. Formed from the ashes of May and drummer Roger Taylor's old band Smile in late 1970, Queen initially struggled to make a name for themselves. When eventually they did, they found themselves polarising opinion. While they had their admirers, they had also inadvertently become whipping boys for some sections of the British music press.

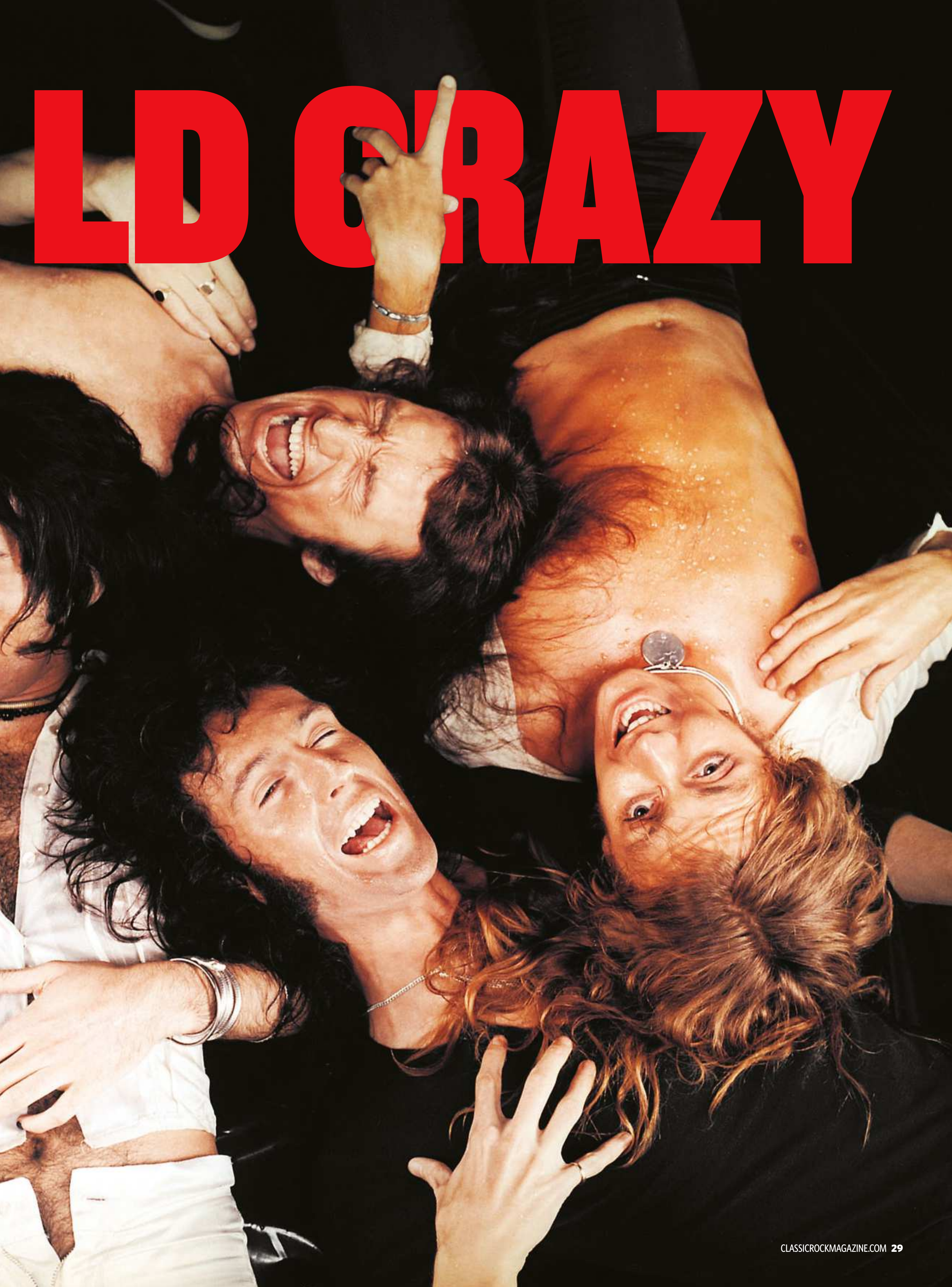
"We were just totally ignored for so long, and then completely slagged off by everyone," Brian May acknowledged. "In a way, that was a very good start for us. There's no kind of abusethat wasn't thrown at us. It was only around the time of *Sheer Heart Attack* that it began to change. But we still got slagged off a fair bit even then."

The opprobrium heaped on them may have hurt them individually, but it only strengthened their collective resolve. Where their first album owed a noticeable debt to Led Zeppelin, the follow-up raised the bar immeasurably. Divided between 'Side White' and 'Side Black' to reflect what Mercury called "the battle between good and evil", it brought both operatic bombast and ballet-pumped daintiness to their heavy rock thunder – often in the same song.

"They planned everything in their heads," says Gary Langan, then an assistant engineer at Sarm Studios in East London, who worked on two *Sheer Heart Attack* tracks. "Nothing was left to chance. That's what separated them from other bands.

MICK ROCK

LD CRAZY



You had to earn Freddie's respect to get close to him. He used to scare the pants off me. The aura around that guy was astonishing."

Mercury was born Farrokh Bulsara, to Indian Parsi parents, on the island of Zanzibar, just off the eastern coast of mainland Africa. His formative years were spent at boarding school near Bombay, where he learned to play music and formed his first band, the Hectics. In 1964, when he was 17, civil war broke out in Zanzibar and the Bulsara family fled the island to settle in the altogether less dangerous environs of Feltham, Middlesex.

It was here, in the chrysalis of suburbia, that Farrokh Bulsara would ultimately transform himself into Freddie Mercury. The latter was an entirely self-created character, as camp and outrageous in public as he was shy and driven in private. By the time of *Queen II*, Farrokh Bulsara was a ghost known only to his family and closest friends; to everyone else he was Freddie Mercury.

Not that the rest of the band were content to exist in Mercury's shadow. Three very distinct personalities, they each brought a different aspect to the band: May the studios intellectual, Taylor the louche rock'n'roller, Deacon the quiet man whose musical contribution would often be overlooked. It was a frequently combustible combination, albeit one with a shared vision.

"Do we row?" said Mercury in '74. "Oh, my dear, we're the bitchiest band on earth. We're at each other's throats. But if we didn't disagree we'd just be 'yes men'. And we do get the cream in the end."

"Fred was marching up and down in my room, going: 'When are these silly bastards going to get it?'"

Ian Hunter

Fittingly, it would be Mott The Hoople who taught Queen how to be a rock'n'roll band. In October 1973, the foursome embarked on a 24-date UK tour with Ian Hunter's survivors. Queen had released their debut album the previous July; the follow-up was already recorded, although it wouldn't be released for another four months (a source of growing tension between band and management).

The two bands couldn't have been more different. Mott were veterans of the rock'n'roll wars: they'd had their ups and downs, and had even split up before David Bowie threw them a lifeline in the shape of *All The Young Dudes*. They'd been there, done that, and rolled their eyes in wry resignation at the thought of it all. By contrast, Queen were young, hungry and at least striving for something approaching glamour. The rocks thrown their way hadn't dented their drive for success in the slightest.

It quickly became apparent that Queen weren't the usual makeweight support band. "They were quite pushy from day one," says Peter Hince. "They demanded more space on stage, they were quite arrogant. They'd got this very clear idea of what they were going to do: 'We're gonna go for it.' But you could see that they were already very good."

For Queen, the tour was an invaluable lesson. They studiously watched the headliners. One of the songs in their own set was a prototype version of *Stone Cold Crazy*, a song that would later appear on *Sheer Heart Attack*.

"On tour as support to Mott, I was conscious

VASELINE & SEAWEED

Photographer Mick Rock tells the story behind his iconic sleeve.

"I met Queen when they were looking for someone to shoot a press shot for their first album and a cover for *Queen II*. I came up with the lighting concept for the sleeve, which was an echo of an old Marlene Dietrich picture.

"The *Sheer Heart Attack* cover was their idea. They were very articulate, very well educated. Freddie was the arty one, but I think it was Roger who came up with the idea. They wanted to look like they'd been thrown up on some distant island. Course, when it came to the shoot itself they wondered what the fuck they were doing.

"If you'd have walked in the studio at that point you'd have seen four geezers lying on the floor, covered in glycerine and having water chucked over them, with me hovering over them. They were very co-operative, albeit uncomfortable.

"The cover was actually two shots: there's a basic shot, then Roger's hair is taken from another shot that's been grafted on – his hair looks like seaweed. It adds another layer to things.

Brian made some comment in my book, *Killer Queen*: 'It was almost worth lying on the floor, covered in Vaseline, having cold water thrown over us'."

For more info, visit www.mickrock.com

MICK ROCK

Specs appeal: (l-r) Brian May, Roger Taylor, John Deacon, Freddie Mercury.

Live killers: Mercury and May in 1974.

MICK ROCK

that we were in the presence of something great," said Brian May. "Something highly evolved, close to the centre of the spirit of rock'n'roll, something to breathe in and learn from."

Typically, Freddie Mercury found playing second fiddle harder to swallow. "Being support is one of the most traumatic experiences of my life," he would later pout.

The Mott tour finished with two shows at Hammersmith Odeon on December 13 and 14, but there was no rest for Queen. The next day they kicked off their own short tour at Leicester University. Shortly afterwards they flew to Australia to play their first show outside Europe; less happily, it ended with the band getting booed off by the roughneck audience.

By the time *Queen II* was released in March 1974, the band were finally matching their own self-belief. With a following wind behind them from the Top 10 success of *Seven Seas Of Rhye*, they kicked off their first proper UK headlining tour, starting in Blackpool, taking in such glamorous rock'n'roll destinations as Paignton, Canvey Island and Cromer, and peaking with a prestigious gig at

London's famed Rainbow Theatre. There was a riot at a show in Stirling, when 500 audience members refused to leave the venue after the final encore, forcing the band to barricade themselves in the dressing room (the next night's show in Birmingham was cancelled when the band were detained for questioning by the disgruntled Stirling police force).

For Freddie Mercury it was proof that Queen's destiny was in their own hands. "You have to have confidence in this business," said the singer. "It's useless saying you don't need it. If you start saying to yourself: 'Maybe I'm not good enough. Maybe I'd better settle for second place,' it's no good. If you like the icing on the top, you've got to have confidence."

While Queen's star was rising in the UK, America was another matter. Barely known beyond a few Anglophile hipsters, they would need to start from scratch to build up anything resembling a Stateside following. Handily, their friends in Mott The Hoople were there to help them out again.

KILLER QUEENS

Leppard, Metallica and Foos serve up the ultimate *Sheer Heart Attack* covers album.

BRIGHTON ROCK **Fastbacks**

Seattle pop-punks (and Duff McKagan's old band) turn in a shambolic version of Brian May's guitar-hero showcase.
On: *Bike-Toy-Clock-Gift*

KILLER QUEEN

Glenn Hughes
Old leather lungs brings some Black Country earthiness to Freddie Mercury's foppish tale of a high-class hooker.
On: *Stone Cold Queen: A Tribute*

TENEMENT FUNSTER/FLICK OF THE WRIST/LILY OF THE VALLEY

Dream Theater
Hirsute Yanks park the neo-prog workouts for a faithful rendition of *Sheer Heart Attack*'s triple-headed cornerstone medley.
On: *Black Clouds & Silver Lining: Special Edition*

NOW I'M HERE

Foo Fighters
Never ones to hide their Queen fandom under a bushel, Dave Grohl's mob have been known to deliver a rough-and-ready version of May's signature song live.
On: various live bootlegs

STONE COLD CRAZY **Metallica**

James Hetfield' and co. add muscle to Queen's proto-thrash original. Unveiled at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert, and a live staple ever since.
On: *Live Shit: Binge And Purge*

DEAR FRIENDS **Def Leppard**

Bassist Rick Savage elbows Joe Elliott aside on this glammed-up version of Brian May's wistful nursery rhyme.
On: *Yeah! (Bonus EP)*

MISFIRE **Neko Case**

Candian chanteuse gives John Deacon's breezy ditty an alt-country makeover.
On: *The Virginian*

"We went out on tour with them. They were very nice people," says Mott's Ian Hunter. "Very intelligent. So we said, 'Okay, do you want to come to America as well?'"

On April 16, Queen played their first US show, in Denver, Colorado as support to Mott. Remarkably, despite the band's name and Mercury's stagecraft, the more macho sections of the American audiences didn't take against them.

"They were more like a normal group," Hunter recalls. "They were playing rock songs, but with their own slant on it. They did say that they picked up a lot of their stagecraft from Mott, you know? You've got to pick it up from somewhere."

This big-brother-little-brother dynamic was evident off stage, as was the support band's desire to be successful. At one point the two bands found themselves staying in a set of apartments owned by *Spartacus* star Kirk Douglas.

"There was a bit of a do in my room," says Ian Hunter, "and Fred's marching up and down saying: 'When are these silly bastards going to figure it out?' Meaning the Americans. I said to him: 'It's a big country, you've got to go around three or four times before it happens. It's not like England, where you can conquer it in a day!' He was very, very impatient. It was hilarious."

The Olympian levels of debauchery that became synonymous with Queen were a few years away, but there were still some memorable moments. Not least when the tour crossed paths with Bette Midler, then a brassy singer who'd made her name on New York's gay bath-house circuit.

"She was doing a theatre in the same town as us," Hunter remembers. "She latched onto Luther (Grovesnor, aka Mott guitarist Ariel Bender). And then we had Bette's mob come back to the hotel with us. There was us, Queen, Bette and these seven-foot guys in feather head-dresses and what have you. Ha ha! It was so much fun."

On May 7, Mott and Queen began a triumphant six-night residency at New York's Uris Theater. But disaster struck the morning after the final show, when Brian May fell ill. The guitarist was diagnosed with hepatitis, possibly picked up from a dirty needle when they were inoculated before that ill-fated Australian show. Distraught, the band were forced to pull out of the tour, and May, against doctor's orders, was flown home. Their plan to conquer America had been derailed. At least for the time being.

"To us it was out of the blue," says Ian Hunter. "They were on the tour and then they're not. Next thing we knew, they had the album out and it was doing extremely well."

"I felt really bad at having let the group down at such an important place," Brian May said in 1974. "But there was nothing to do about it. It was hepatitis, which you get sometimes when you're emotionally run-down."

Laid up in hospital after returning from America, May was feeling guilty and frustrated at inadvertently curtailing his band's American ambitions. Understandably keen to rejoin his bandmates who had started work on their next album without him, he'd already begun writing while convalescing. One of the songs he was working on, *Now I'm Here*, reflected the disconnect between touring the US with Mott The Hoople and his living in a pokey bedsit in West London with his girlfriend. "It came out quite easily," said the guitarist. "Where I'd been wrestling with it before without getting anywhere."

It was a six weeks before May recovered from his bout of hepatitis. After being discharged he immediately rejoined the others in the studio. But something was wrong. May was constantly being sick, and he couldn't eat anything. He was taken back to hospital, where doctors discovered that he had an undiagnosed stomach ulcer, which had been aggravated by the hepatitis.

"I was stuck in hospital for a few weeks, and they did some stuff to me which was like a miracle," said May. "I thought I was dead. Being ill like that may even have been a good thing at the time, because although it was pretty hellish going through it, I felt glad to be alive and I became able to hold things in perspective more and not get so wound up and worried about them to make myself ill."

> **"So much was happening with us. We felt the need for a change, and we put ourselves under pressure."**
> **– Freddie Mercury**

By the time May returned to the sessions for the second time, work was properly underway on the new album. It was a strange experience for the guitarist, although not a negative one.

"It was very weird, because I was able to see the group from the outside, and was pretty excited by what I saw," he later said. "We'd done a few things before I was ill, but when I came back they'd done a load more, including a couple of backing tracks of songs by Freddie which I hadn't heard, like *Flick Of The Wrist*, which excited me and gave me a lot of inspiration to get back in there and do what I wanted to do."

Sheer Heart Attack was recorded between July and October 1974. Once again, the album was produced by Roy Thomas Baker, a larger-than-life character who matched Mercury in the charisma stakes.

"Every one of our musical and production frustrations came out on *Queen II*," said Baker. "The idea for the third album was to get together and do some 'simpler' songs for a change; real little, short songs. And it was very successful on that level."

Unlike *Queen* and *Queen II*, *Sheer Heart Attack* was conceived in the studio, albeit through necessity rather than by design. "Nobody knew we were going to be told we had two weeks to write *Sheer Heart Attack*," said Mercury. "And we had to – it was the only thing we could do. Brian was in hospital."

Despite the setback of the cancelled US tour, there was no doubt among the band that *Sheer Heart Attack* would take them to the next level. The black-and-white approach of *Queen II* had been reigned in, replaced by a kaleidoscopic range of sounds and styles. Leading this new approach was *Killer Queen*, an outrageously camp ditty that was closer to Noël Coward than to Robert Plant.

"That was the one song which was really out of the format that I usually write in," said Mercury. "Usually the music comes first, but the words, and the sophisticated style that I wanted to put across in the song, came first."

Taylor, Mercury and May recording *Sheer Heart Attack* at Trident Studios in 1974.

MICK ROCK

Many have claimed to be the inspiration behind *Killer Queen*, most notably Eric 'Monster! Monster!' Hall, the future football agent who then worked as Queen's radio plugger. According to Mercury, the title chartacter was pure fantasy.

"No, I'd never really met a woman like that," he explained after the album's release. "I can dream up all kinds of things. That's the kind of world I live in. It's very flamboyant."

If *Killer Queen* was the best-known song, it was hardly representative of the album, largely because the band didn't chain themselves to one style. No band other than The Beatles had dared throw as many different styles into the mix with as much confidence. That state of affairs in Queen was helped by the fact that all four members pitched in with the writing.

A convalescing May delivered the rockers, including *Now I'm Here* and opener *Brighton Rock* (working titles: *Bognor Ballad*, *Southend Sea Scout* and *Happy Little Fuck*). Bookended by a picaresque tale of two seaside lovers sung in high and low registers by Mercury, it was a showcase for an extended May guitar solo dating back to *Blag*, a song by his old band Smile. By contrast, Mercury threw in everything from waspish glam rock (*Flick Of The Wrist*, a reflection of their increasingly strained relationship with their management) to old-fashioned vaudeville (*Bring Back Leroy Brown*, complete with ukelele solo from May). Most prescient was *In The Lap Of The Gods*, a two-part, near-operatic epic that laid the groundwork for *Bohemian Rhapsody* the following year.

In this creative environment, the rhythm section also rocked up with material. Taylor, who had written a song for each of their previous albums, contributed *Tenement Funster*, a lachrymose salute to the rock'n'roll lifestyle, and an overlooked Queen gem. John Deacon chipped in with the slight but perfectly formed *Misfire*. The furious *Stone Cold Crazy* – an influence on the future members of Metallica, and hence a cornerstone of the thrash metal movement – was credited to all four members, even though it dated from Mercury's pre-Queen band Wreckage.

For a band who were frequently mocked for being shallow, there were plenty of hidden depths, not least on Mercury's delicate *Lily Of The Valley*. The singer's sexuality was the subject of much debate in the press; apparent double-bluffs such as his famous proclamation that "I'm as gay as a daffodil, dear" deliberately clouded the issue. But while Mercury was still living with girlfriend Mary Austin, he reputedly told his closest friends that he was gay.

"Freddie's stuff was so heavily cloaked, lyrically," Brian May said in 1999. "But you could find out, just from little insights, that a lot of his private thoughts were in there, although a lot of the more meaningful stuff was not very accessible. *Lily Of The Valley* was utterly heartfelt. It's about looking at his girlfriend and realising that his body needed to be somewhere else."

All such personal distractions were kept out of the studio. "The guys worked 15 hour days," says Gary Langan, who worked as tape operator on *Now I'm Here* and *Brighton Rock*. "When we finished work at Sarm, we'd meet them at a club called the Valbonne in Soho. That's when they let their hair down."

This drive for perfection ensured there was no fat on *Sheer Heart Attack*. Just two songs failed to make the final album. One was May's imperious reworking of the national anthem, *God Save The Queen*, later resurrected for 1975's *A Night At The Opera*. The other was the song that gave the album its title, the frantic, Taylor-penned *Sheer Heart Attack*. Little more than the bare bones of a song when they started, the drummer failed to finish it in time. They finally got around to recording it for 1977's *News Of The World* album, underpinned with the sneering key lyric: *'I feel so inar.. inar… inar inar… inarticulate'*. The band in the next studio at the time? The Sex Pistols.

By the time *Sheer Heart Attack* was released on November 1, 1974, *Killer Queen* had already given Queen their first Top 3 hit. *Now I'm Here* followed a couple of months later, complete with touching nod to unofficial mentors Mott The Hoople ("It was nice," recalls Ian Hunter, "but there was no money attached to it"). Between the two, Queen embarked on their first proper world tour, headlining. This time there were no illnesses or riots, though they were greeted by scenes approaching Beatlemania when they arrived in Japan in April 1975. The effort that went into *Sheer Heart Attack* had paid off.

Forty years on it stands as Queen's most pivotal album. They had greater success later, but none of it would have be possible without the groundwork laid down here. "That was the album that showed the world what they were capabale of," says Gary Langan. "If that album hadn't been as successful as it was, then something like *A Night At The Opera* probably wouldn't have been accepeted."

Freddie Mercury put it more succinctly.

"We were in a prolific stage and so much was happening with us, dear," he said afterwards. "We felt the need for a change of sorts and, as ever, we felt able to go to extremes. As usual, we put ourselves under pressure. That's just us."

Queen

Stone Cold Crazy

Clocking in at just over two minutes, the song that announced Queen to the world (in a town hall in 1970) but wasn't recorded until their third album, distilled everything that made them so great.

Words: **Mark Blake**

For three decades, from the early 70s onwards, Mike Grose worked for the Grose family haulage business in St Austell. Most people who meet the unassuming Cornishman nowadays would be surprised to learn that he was once the bass guitarist in Queen.

On the evening of Saturday June 27, 1970 the then 22-year-old Grose, drummer Roger Taylor, guitarist Brian May and vocalist Fred Bulsara played their debut gig as Queen, at Cornwall's Truro City Hall. "And the first song we played was *Stone Cold Crazy*," Grose recalls.

Scroll forward 44 years and *Stone Cold Crazy* can be heard in all its manic glory on the new *Queen Live At The Rainbow '74* box set. Furthermore, May and Taylor have revived what could be called Queen's first song on their recent US dates.

Stone Cold Crazy might not have been released as a single, but it's the very essence of 70s Queen: loud, silly, bombastic and fun. Although it didn't appear on record until Queen's third album, 1974's *Sheer Heart Attack*, it was conceived by the future Freddie Mercury before Queen existed.

In the summer of 1969, Fred Bulsara was struggling through his final term at Ealing Art College and fantasising about becoming a pop star. He already knew Brian May and Roger Taylor through fellow art student Tim Staffell, who sung and played bass in May and Taylor's trio Smile. Freddie was Smile's number-one fan and occasional roadie. And he desperately wanted to be their lead singer.

In the meantime he talked his way into another band, despite having never sung on stage before. In August 1969 Bulsara joined the hard rock trio Ibex. Two months later, after seeing Led Zeppelin at London's Lyceum, he convinced Ibex to change their name to the much heavier-sounding Wreckage. *Stone Cold Crazy* was supposedly written around this time.

In May 1970 the gods smiled and Bulsara replaced Staffell in Smile. His first suggestion was that they change their name to Queen. Meanwhile, Taylor brought in his friend Mike Grose, who moved from Cornwall to the group's shared house in Barnes. Grose remembers rehearsing *Stone Cold Crazy*, among other early Queen songs, in the back garden that summer.

"*Stone Cold Crazy* was one of Freddie's frenetic ideas," May said in 2014. "But the original was much slower." The guitarist suggested speeding up the bluesy riff, resulting in something that sounded not unlike Led Zep's *Communication Breakdown*.

The gig at Truro City Hall was in aid of the Cornish branch of the Red Cross, of which Taylor's mother, Winifred, was a fundraiser. Winifred had actually booked Smile. But the sparse audience who paid their seven shillings and sixpence (about 40p) were instead confronted by the newly crowned Queen, in matching black velvet trousers, and the future Freddie Mercury strutting and posing as if he was playing Wembley Stadium. In fact Freddie's posing was more accomplished than his vocals. "He sounded like a rather powerful bleating sheep," said Taylor.

Yet within days of the gig, Fred Bulsara was telling everyone that he now wished to be known as Freddie Mercury and that Queen were going to conquer the world. Mike Grose, however, wasn't so sure, and soon moved back to Cornwall and a steady job in haulage.

Bassist John Deacon joined Queen in February 1971, after which the group bagged a deal with EMI. Their debut album, *Queen*, was released in November 1973, followed by *Queen II* four months later. But there was no sign of *Stone Cold Crazy* on either.

During recording sessions for the next album, *Sheer Heart Attack*, Brian May was hospitalised with a duodenal ulcer. His bandmates carried on without him, and crowded around his bed in King's College Hospital to play him tapes of work in progress. *Stone Cold Crazy*, one of the few 70s Queen songs credited to the whole group, eventually showed up on side two of the finished album.

In many ways the song distilled everything that made 70s Queen so great – but in just 2:16 minutes. The attacking riff, manic harmonies and comic-book lyrics were signature moves that Queen would expand on and use to build bigger hits.

Although Brian May has confessed to having "no idea what it's about", it's hard not to wonder whether *Stone Cold Crazy* was partly about the young Fred Bulsara. There are elements of the art student who told everyone he was going to be a pop star in the song's cartoonish hero, '*dreaming I was Al Capone*' and '*walking down the street, shooting people that I meet with my rubber Tommy water gun.*' For all their noise and braggadocio, Queen didn't really *do* death and destruction.

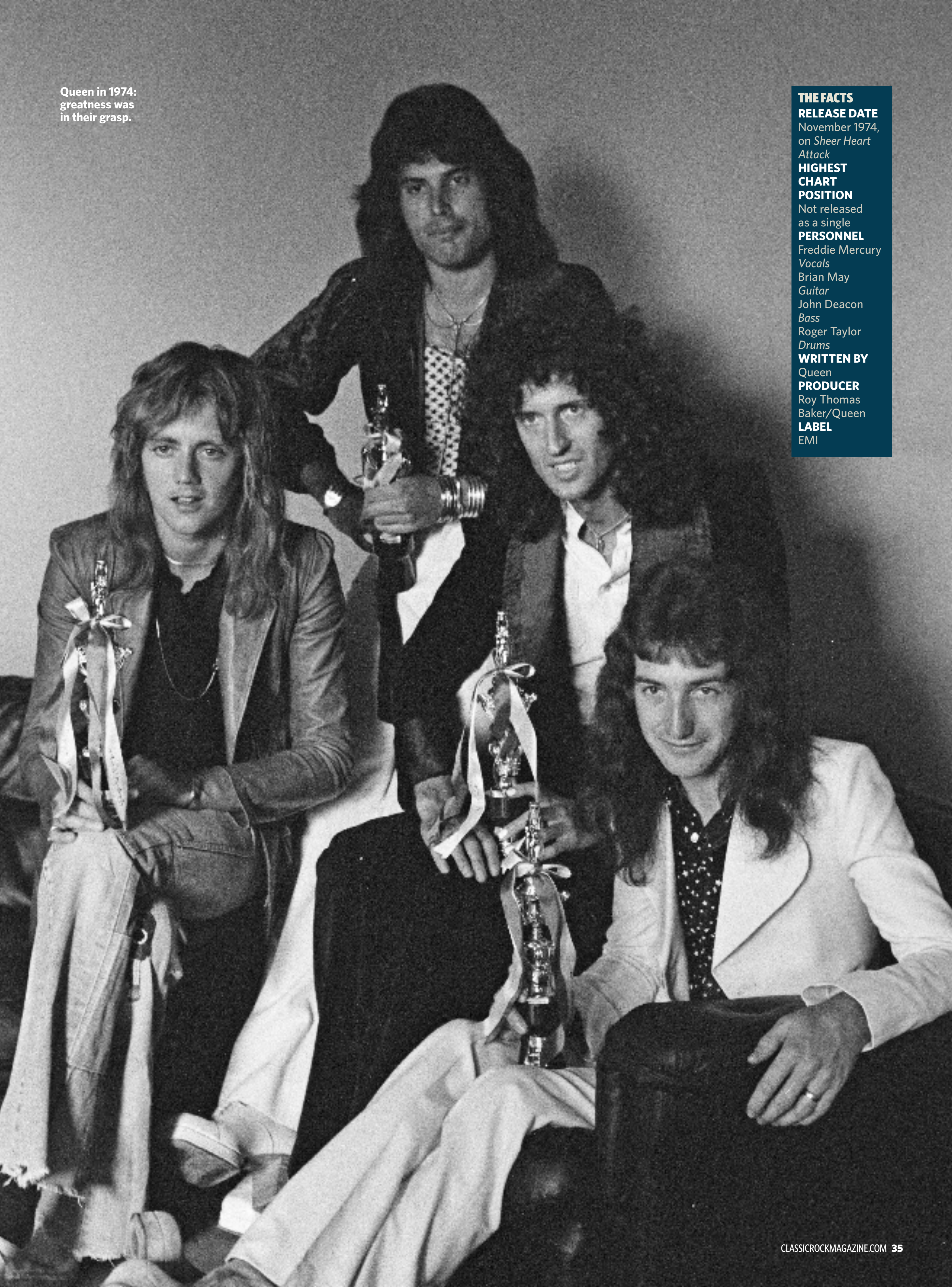
'Brian May has "no idea what it's about", but it's hard not to wonder whether *Stone Cold Crazy* was partly about the young Fred.'

Tellingly, when Metallica's James Hetfield performed *Stone Cold Crazy* with May, Taylor, Deacon and Tony Iommi at 1992's Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert, it became '*my fully loaded Tommy gun*'. The same line was present in Metallica's achingly macho version on 1998's *Garage Days Inc* covers album.

May and Taylor, meanwhile, have been inspired by the song that announced Queen to the world, albeit via a town hall in Cornwall, after rediscovering it on the *Live At The Rainbow '74* box set. Queen's 2014 setlist now includes *Stone Cold Crazy* and other songs that have lain dormant since the mid-70s, all revived by frontman Adam Lambert, whom Brian May credits for having "woken us up again". Four decades since his first appearance, it's reassuring to know that Fred's imaginary Al Capone with his rubber Tommy water gun is back roaming the street again.

RAINBOW RISING
Queen's two shows at London's Rainbow Theatre in 1974 (released in a CD/DVD box set in 2014) were landmark gigs. The band first headlined the Rainbow in March, then returned in November after their first Top 10 hit, *Killer Queen*. They knew they'd struck gold after the March show, when The Who's Pete Townshend's 13-year-old brother Simon was taken backstage and informed Freddie Mercury that Queen were "much better than my brother's band". Eyewitnesses remember Freddie "being ecstatic" at the compliment.

GETTY



Queen in 1974: greatness was in their grasp.

THE FACTS

RELEASE DATE
November 1974, on *Sheer Heart Attack*

HIGHEST CHART POSITION
Not released as a single

PERSONNEL
Freddie Mercury *Vocals*
Brian May *Guitar*
John Deacon *Bass*
Roger Taylor *Drums*

WRITTEN BY
Queen

PRODUCER
Roy Thomas Baker/Queen

LABEL
EMI

Mercury rising: Freddie gives it large onstage.

Caught In A Landslide

It's November 1975 and **Queen** are about to release the album of their career, *A Night At The Opera*. But meantime there's the small matter of this sixminute 'operatic thing' they want to release as the lead single – what radio station is gonna play that? Classic Rock goes behind the scenes with Queen as they prepare to go stratospheric.

Words: **Harry Doherty**

It could have been any other damp, cold Friday afternoon in the November of any other year. But this one was a bit special… 1975 was heading for Christmas and I was in the middle of a music mag office in sole, exclusive possession of the album, the song, from the band that would rule the world of rock for the next 30 years. Full of anticipation, I put the test pressing on the office turntable and something called *Bohemian Rhapsody* soared out. Well, it soared for me: it dive-bombed for others in the office. One colleague, Allan Jones, was horrified: "What is this?!" He guessed at 10cc. When I told him that it was Queen, his jaw dropped and hit the floor. He hated it! I loved it, and went on to review Queen's A Night At The Opera for Melody Maker.

I said things like 'easily their best work to date', some words about 'intricate musicianship' and 'displaying the variety of their talent', commented that it would be remembered as an album of 'May classics' (was it?), and hooked unashamedly on to *Bohemian Rhapsody*. 'The album,' I wrote, 'picks up the best of the concepts of *Queen II* and combines it with the studio expertise of *Sheer Heart Attack*. That combination, plus the growing maturity of the band, has given Queen a complete identity. Indeed, I don't think I'd be too far out if I said that Queen could well set a future direction in British rock'n'roll. They're hard rock, but just commercial enough to capture a massive, wide-ranging audience.'

I think I was on the button with that one…

Thirty years later, friends have come and gone – goodbye, Fred – but Queen, in one shape or other, are still very much with us. Downloaded off the net, on stage every night in the West End and Vegas, and on the road with Paul Rodgers. When Queen played at Hyde Park this past September, few remembered they had played there once before in September 1976 – a huge gig in front of over 150,000 people and one of the great free Hyde Park events. The Queen we know now are a part of the fibre of our rock community.

Back in the mid-1970s, however, Queen were mere mortals – not that they thought so. When you were was in the presence of Freddie Mercury, you knew it… and you believed it. With *Sheer Heart Attack* on the verge of release, I'd interviewed His Majesty in the office of his press officer, Tony Brainsby. Nothing could have prepared me for the experience… but I soon learned. *Sheer Heart Attack* is as close to hard rock-cum-pop perfection as you can get; but even then, the album in the bag, treading on the doorstep of humungous success, Freddie is not happy. And he's not happy that they had to record this album in bits and pieces; a situation generated when Brian May, suffering from hepatitis, took to bed and recovery while the other three recorded the tracks.

May had returned with the condition after the band's debut tour in America with Mott The Hoople. So when they started recording *Sheer Heart Attack*, it was without their guitarist. He came in afterwards on his own to add guitar. Though the ailing Brian had delivered his parts to a superlative album like a true guitar hero, Freddie was adamant that Brian had brought this upon himself. "Well, darling," he said, "we covered for him. He owed it to us."

A year later, November 1975, I'm in the presence of greatness again as Queen are close to finishing what would be recognised as the album of their lives, *A Night At The Opera*. We're in the offices of Rocket Records, because the band have by this time appointed John Reid, Elton John's chargé d'affaires, as their business manager; Reid had been appointed after an earlier disastrous management contract with a company called Trident, who also owned the studios where Queen recorded most of their early albums, including *A Night At The Opera*. It obviously went seriously sour, as described in the opening track of *A Night At The Opera*, *Death On Two Legs*, with barbed lyrics such as: 'Screw my brain 'til it hurts/You've taken all my money – and you want more' and 'You're a sewer-rat decaying in a cesspool of pride' – possibly the ultimate put-down. Reid would be a stop-gap until Queen established their own business empire.

For now, though, there's me, Freddie, John Deacon and Roger Taylor, but no Brian May. The man is exhausted after his efforts recording his parts on *A Night At The Opera* – they do say that hepatitis lingers on. Taylor is nestled in one corner. A real rock'n'roll animal during these years, he's restless. "I'm pissed off listening to the bloody album," he mutters. Four months in the making, the nights with this *…Opera* have taken their toll.

In another corner of the office, Freddie is on the phone to some American hack telling him, darling: "The album is absolutely wonderful, you really must hear it." But he, like Taylor, has had his fill of *A Night At The Opera* just now. Which is ironic because we're on our way to the first public playback of said masterpiece…

"I'll never forget this album, dear," Freddie tells me. "Never. But we've got to have this playback just to let friends hear what we've been up to. The problem, as I see it, is that they'll never understand it with one listen." He can't wait to get it over with. "Later on we'll go out, get pissed and put the damned album on hold for a while."

I'm with you Freddie, I think, but I still can't wait to hear what you're so pissed off about…

They're fidgety. John Deacon is all fingers drumming on desk and picking out faults on the tour programme. The band are going out on a worldwide tour in a week or so. No pressure…

GETTY

"Where's my other washing up glove gone?" Freddie and John Deacon onstage in 1974.

GETTY

Meanwhile, Freddie is still spreading the good word to the States about the album, and Taylor and Deacon are debating how *Bohemian Rhapsody*, six minutes long and not exactly yer typical single, will go down. They're amused, but couldn't care less. As we arrive at the North London Roundhouse studio for the playback we're greeted by a placard proclaiming: 'Welcome to A Night At The Opera'.

"We're not nervous," Taylor offers, "we're just nervous wrecks. I just want to get out on the road again." The realisation that he has just four days to achieve that particular ambition weighs heavily upon him.

The playback goes extraordinarily well. Everyone realises that they are experiencing something monumental. The record company is pleased, the party is ecstatic, the champagne is flowing – time for Freddie and I to depart. But not before we listen to the final historic rendition of *The National Anthem* on harmony guitars by Brian May, the glorious closure of *A Night At The Opera*. We listen in thrall. Freddie can't believe it. "STAND UP YOU BASTARDS!" he shouts, and whether it is in salute to Queen or *The* Queen I am still not sure. But we all did his biding as if by royal command.

Then the Mercury Man and myself are in a car and heading to the White Elephant on the River for a tête-à-tête and review of the past couple of months of his life over dinner. "Thank goodness that's over," Freddie sighs. "Some of those people really BOO-OORE me."

On his own, Freddie's kaleidoscopic personality vibrates. If you are in his company, the feeling you get is that you are the sole purpose for his being; he is so completely entertaining and engrossing. At a top-notch restaurant, he demands the service of someone royal before finally we get down to discussing *A Night At The Opera*.

"It's really taken the longest to do out of our four albums so far," he says. "We didn't really cater for it. We just set upon it and we were going to do so many things. It's taken us about four months and now we've gone over the deadline with the tour approaching. It's more important to get the album the way we want it, especially after we've spent so long on it.

"The last bits – piecing it together – are more important than the rest of it. It's easily our most important album yet, to be honest. In a way the best judge we had was tonight because we listened to it back for the first time. We just haven't had the time to do that. I know that we've got the strongest set of songs ever. It is going to be our best album, it really is.

"If I thought there was something wrong with it, I would say so, but there are certain things on this album which we've wanted to do for a long time. I'm really pleased about the operatic thing" – ahem, we're talking about

"We went overboard on every album. But that's just the way Queen is."

Freddie Mercury

Bohemian Rhapsody now – "I really wanted to be outrageous with the vocals because we're always getting compared to other people, which is very stupid. If you really listen to the operatic bit, there are no comparisons, which is what we want. But we don't set out to be outrageous – it's in us. There are so many things that we want to do but we can't do everything at the same time. It's impossible. At the moment, I'm happy that we've made an album which, let's face it, is too much to take for some people. But it was what we wanted to do."

Mercury considers the impact Queen made with *Sheer Heart Attack*. It posited them where they wanted to be – in a sphere of influence. *Queen II* had set the cards on the table; *Sheer Heart Attack* had stated "here's what we can do"; *A Night At The Opera* took it to the limit.

Freddie uses his fork as an exclamation mark, stabbing his food as he speaks. "With *Sheer Heart Attack*, we thought, we can do certain things and establish ourselves!" Stab! "Like vocally, we can outdo any band!" Stab! "With this album, we just thought that we would go out, not restrict ourselves with any barriers, and just do what we want to do!" Stab!

He considered *Bohemian* Rhapsody specifically. "I had this operatic 'thing', and I thought why don't we doo-oo-oo it." His affectation on the 'do' really emphasises his ▷

Freddie Mercury: "I had this operatic 'thing' and I thought, 'Why don't we do it?'

The Man Who Would Be Queen

Roy Thomas Baker was the 'fifth member of Queen', the producer who gave them that sound.

Who made who? Did Roy Thomas Baker, co-producer of *A Night at The Opera* with the band, make Queen; or did Queen make Roy Thomas Baker? A bit of both probably, because they were invaluable to each other. However, it is fair to say that, 30 years on and with the new Darkness album under his belt, RTB is still remembered as the man who produced Queen.

When 1975 was turning into '76, Roy's reputation was going through the roof. I caught up with him in the same studio where much of *A Night at The Opera* was recorded - SARM in West London. He was working with Pilot (you remember, '*Januar-eee, sick and tired, you've been hangin' on me...*' etc etc). As it happens, Pilot weren't a bad band and with Ian Bairnson on board as guitarist, they wanted a rockier edge to their stuff.

RTB first got into the record business in 1963 when he joined Decca as assistant engineer. His early conquests included Ten Years After, Savoy Brown, John Mayall, The Rolling Stones, Dr John, Eric Clapton and Delaney & Bonnie. Not a bad start, you'd think. His first production was on Nazareth's second album, 1972's *Exercises*, which failed to set the world alight.

By then, he had taken the visionary step of forming his own production company and got a call from a new band called Queen. Brian May and Roger Taylor invited him down to the just opened De Lane Lea studios to check them out. Queen had landed the gig of testing the room's acoustics. Bagging free studio time had saved them a lot of money they didn't have in the early days.

When Baker arrived at the studio, Queen were playing *Keep Yourself Alive*, yet to be recorded... He went on to produce said song and the rest on Queen.

"On a personal level, I feel closer to them than to anyone else," Baker said then. "Because I'd only produced one album before Queen, I've matured as a producer as they've matured as a band. We've grown together."

Queen and Roy Thomas Baker would constantly experiment. Baker had a reputation throughout Europe as a guinea pig for new electronic gadgets. When he would get a new-fangled gizmo, he would take it along to Queen sessions, let the band play with it, and sometimes it would end up on record.

"Working with Queen, you can't put it in normal terms," he explained. "We're up against the usual thing of diminishing returns. For instance, if you spend a month on an album, it might be good; but if you spend two months on the same album, it doesn't necessarily mean it's going to be twice as good. To get that, you have to work on something for four months."

Which is exactly what they did with *A Night At The Opera*...

"Queen can't work like any normal group. They utilise each other's talents to the fullest. The middle operatic section in Bohemian Rhapsody, for example, took about six to seven days to record in total. It was multi-tracked and there were so many harmonies that it takes quite a while to sort it out It's the same case with Brian May's harmony guitar work."

Baker concluded: "A lot of the band's ideas are revolutionary in 1975; a lot of the style is revolutionary. You've got a band that has a relatively heavy rhythm section, is versatile musically and sings exceedingly well. The Queen situation is unique." He wasn't far wrong.

Coming up roses: Queen pick up gold discs and flowers for *A Night At The Opera*.

GETTY X3

The live show proved to be a spontaneous release for Queen after months in the studio

determination to achieve something radically different. By then, I'd heard the track a few times. 'Overboard' was a word I used to him to describe the work.

"We went a bit overboard on every album, actually," he responded gleefully. "But that's just the way Queen is. In certain areas, we feel that we want to go overboard. It's what keeps us going really, darling. If we were to come up with an album where people said: 'It's just like *Sheer Heart Attack* but there were a few bits on *Sheer Heart Attack* that are better…' Well, I'd give up. Wouldn't you?"

I pathetically nod 'yes', as if I had just made an album the measure of *Sheer Heart Attack* that very evening…

As we tucked into a main course avec bubbly, Freddie, though, was sure that Queen were firmly set on a right royal journey. "What really helped was the last tour. We've done a really successful worldwide tour which we've never done before. All that experience was accumulating and when we came to do this album, there were certain things which we had done in the past which we can do much better now.

"Our playing ability was better. Backing tracks on this album are far superior. We start off with backing tracks and we really felt they were really closely knit, and we seemed to feel each other's needs, which is very important for backing tracks.

"I think Queen has really got its own identity now. I don't care what journalists say – we got our identity after *Queen II*. With that album, we had our own thing. America saw that it was good, and so did Japan. Since then, we're the biggest group in Japan. I don't mind saying that. We are! We outdo anybody. And that's because we've taken it on our own musical terms.

"So since Queen II we've had our own identity and, of course, if we do something that's harmonised, we'll be The Beach Boys and if we do something that's heavy, we'll be Led Zeppelin, or whatever. But the thing is that we have an identity of our own because we combine all those things which mean Queen. That's what people don't seem to realise.

"A lot of people have slammed *Bohemian Rhapsody* but if you listen to that single, who can you compare it to? Tell me one group that's done an operatic single? I can't think of one! But we didn't do an operatic single because we thought we'd be the only group to do it. It just happened!

"The title of the album came at the very end of recording. We thought: 'Oh God, what are we going to call this album?'" Typically, the two most humorous members of the band reverted to The Marx Brothers, but this was certainly an album made by a group firmly placing collective heads in the noose.

"We've always done that," Freddie agreed. "We've always put our necks on the line. We did it with *Queen II*. On that album we did so many outrageous things that people started to say 'self-indulgent', 'crap', 'too many vocals'… but that is Queen. After that, they seemed to realise what Queen was all about."

And just to tighten the noose, let's stick out a six-minute mini-opera that possibly stands no chance of getting radio play… "We look upon our product as songs," Freddie considers gently. "We don't worry about singles or albums. All we do is pick the cream of the crop. Then we look upon it as a whole to make sure the whole album works.

"With *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we just thought it was a very strong song and so we released it. But there were so many arguments about it. Somebody suggested cutting it down because the media reckons we have to have a three minute single, but we want to put across Queen as songs. There is no point in cutting it. If you want to cut down *Bohemian Rhapsody*, it just won't work.

"We just wanted to release it to say that this is what Queen are about at this stage. This is the single and you're going to have an album after that."

And this, asserts Fred, is the uniqueness of Queen. Their USP (Unique Selling Point) is simply: take it or leave it. Like it or loathe it. "We're just very different. We do things now in a style that is very different to anybody else. But we haven't

acquired that just to be different, it just happened. We go through so many traumas, and we're so meticulous. There are literally scores of songs that have been rejected for this album – some of them nice ones. If people don't like the songs we're doing at the moment, we couldn't give a fuck. We're probably the fussiest band in the world, to be honest. We take so much care with what we do because we feel so much about what we put across.

"And if we do an amazing album we make sure that album is packaged right, because we've put so much loving into it. It's what we do, darling."

The interview finished, Freddie invites his multicolour, multisexual, effervescent, personal entourage to join us – here's Kenny Everett pushing to the front to embrace and congratulate his buddy on a job well done. Everett was the first Freddie turned to when he realised that *Bohemian Rhapsody* might not make it to the nation's airwaves. Six minutes, he told Freddie, you have no chance. And then proceeded to play it something like 10 times on his radio show that weekend. *Bo-Rhap* was on its way…

The next day, after exposing their masterwork to the fickle elements of the media, the band got together again to listen through to *A Night At The Opera* one more time before sending it to the pressing factory. And that's when they decided to remix it…

A few weeks later, and I'm sitting backstage at Hammersmith Odeon talking with Brian May, just as Queen are preparing for a soundcheck for a series of gigs in west London. Sitting there, considering the immensity of what is happening around his band, May is calmness itself.

"We're a bigger band now and we can afford to plough more into the presentation. We've always lived beyond our means anyway! Dynamics are things we consider worthwhile in a show, just so that we can make it a complete evening out for the fans. The glamour will never take away from the music. We're much too conscious of the music to let that happen.

"The music is first in everything and if we add a particular effect or particular lights, it's to get across a certain mood at a certain time to emphasise the music.

"You see, you have to understand it's romantic music we're playing – in the old sense of the word. It's music to tear your emotions apart. There's a kind of personality we share with our audience. We're like that. We're sort of schizophrenic. We like to be serious about some things and not as serious about others."

Ah, and here we have Queen on tour. Here we have in *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *A Night At The Opera*, a quintessential 'studio record'; we have the Queen that proudly proclaim on album sleeves 'no synthesisers'; the Queen lording it ➢

Freddie Mercury: easy come, easy go... and wearing a poncho

GETTY x2

"Tell me one group that's done an operatic single. I can't think of one!"

Freddie Mercury

Queen: multicolour, multisexual, personal entourage out of shot.

on the road; the Queen that has to reproduce this on stage. How do you square that circle, Brian?

May considered this. "We play differently on stage from on record. On stage, it's good to have a two-way conversation with the audience rather than oneway. Let me explain this. It's no good just getting out there and playing if you're not getting across to the people. We treat recording as a separate thing altogether from the stage act. We don't have any thought of holding back something on record if we couldn't do it on stage. There are very complicated things on the record but, hopefully, not complicated for complication's sake.

"There's a lot of texture on our albums. We started that with our second album." You see now that *Queen II* is a significant album in the growth of Queen. It is my favourite Queen album, by the way. Brian developed the theme. "That album has a lot of impact. If you listen to our albums more and more, you will get more and more out of them."

Still, as *Bohemian Rhapsody* and *A Night At The Opera* were being unleashed, May was ticking the box that said 'room for improvement'. "I'd like to see us, as a four-piece, work together more on songs. In the case of *A Night At The Opera*, it was impossible because we didn't have enough time, and we were in the situation where a couple of us were in one studio and the others in another, so you lose a bit of the group feeling in that way.

"It's good to be out on the road," he says. "It draws you together."

You get a sense that Brian thinks too much, and when he talks to you about *A Night At The Opera*, he's what you might call 'picky'…

"It's not that there is too much individualism," he says. "I can point toward things on this album which have suffered from us not having us all there at one time. and because there was too much responsibility on one person at one time very often. I can't say which tracks because it would spoil it for people. That's not to say I don't think it's a good album. I love it."

We went on to talk about the Queen modus operandi; how the band got from college to collective. I point out that with four very strong personalities in the Queen ranks, it wouldn't be surprising that things might get a little bit hectic now and then.

"Generally," May answers, "the working relationship within the band is that we tend to leave each other alone musically, unless asked. That would be my interpretation. If someone has an idea, you assume that they want to be left alone to get on with it and put it across the best way.

"Sometimes, they'll come and talk about it, which I do a lot. Maybe I can't make a decision and I'll come to the others and say, 'How does this strike you?' and they'll suggest something and usually I'll agree.

"The relationship gets strained sometimes. I got very worried once that I was going out on a limb and that the rest of the band didn't really approve of what I was doing. It happened on a track on *A*

"*It's romantic music we're playing. It's music to tear your emotions apart.*"

Brian May

Night At The Opera – Good Company. I spent days and days doing those trumpet and trombone things [all of which were played by May on the guitar] and trying to get into the character of those instruments. The others were doing other things and they'd pop in from time to time and say, 'Well, you haven't done much since we last saw you…'

"They probably wouldn't mean it in a dire way, but I would get very offended and very worried that I was doing something which their heart wasn't in but, in the end, it turned out well."

And Freddie. What was it about the Mercury-May chemistry, especially when May worked on Mercury songs? How did that work?

"Freddie and I worked together very well. Is it hard? No, quite the opposite. I find it natural. I think he's got a knack of using me to my best advantage. Usually he has everything sorted out until the last note, calls me over and tells me which way he wants it. There is never any friction.

"He's got a strong personality. I think we all have. We're all very stubborn, particularly in the studio, and sometimes it leads to bad feeling. Generally, however, if it comes down to a genuine musical argument, we tend to see eye to eye in the end. We all know where we're going; it's just a question of how we get there that is argued about."

We rattle on about Freddie for a while, laugh about him, his ways and his genius. May could talk on the subject for hours, he says. "Freddie is a born figurehead," he comments with deep affection. "He loves himself to be used as a figurehead. He knows exactly what's best for himself.

"Freddie knows exactly what he wants and how to get it. He's definitely the driving force behind the band getting where it is. He's flashy but he knows he's got the substance to back it up. He'll never be flash in an area where he's not confident. If there's something he knows he doesn't know much about, he'll steer completely away from it, or he'll conquer it. There's no halfway house. He won't give the impression that he knows what he's talking about when he doesn't. He'll always make sure that he knows what he is talking about and then let everybody know. Some people think that he's arrogant but in fact, he's only arrogant when he knows he can afford to be."

After all, who could challenge Freddie Mercury? The other members of Queen, if anything, pushed their singer to the front and encouraged him to impose his magnetic personality on to the media and public. Such was their confidence in their own musical ability and business nous that they were perfectly happy to let Freddie loose.

"It's good that Freddie has such a strong personality because he doesn't let it go to his head, which he could quite easily have done," says May. "It's very weird that that happened. We could see it happening from the beginning. He's our frontman and we consciously used it in that way. The press did, and still do, take it too far. A lot of the press are very dimly aware that the rest of the group exist.

"It would be a big mistake for anybody to disregard the role each member plays in Queen. It really does interlock well as a group and we couldn't do without any one of us at all. I think if anyone left it would disappear."

…Only to reappear occasionally, as if by a kind of magic.

In The Opera-ting Theatre

Brian May casts his mind back to the days of Bo-Rhap.

A few weeks after the culmination of the UK leg of the Queen + Paul Rodgers tour, we caught up with Brian May to relive a warm memory or two about the band's career-breaking album, *A Night At The Opera*. Interview: Simon Bradley

From a band member's point of view, how were Queen doing in 1975?
Business-wise, we were in crisis. We'd had a lot of success but we were in a management situation that seemed to have no light at the end of the tunnel. We weren't getting any of our royalties and although money isn't everything, it's not good to feel you're in what you perceive to be a slave-labour situation.

So *A Night At The Opera* really was make or break in that sense. John Reid, who'd just taken over our management, said that he'd take over the business side and that we should go away and make the best album we've ever made! But there was that feeling that if it didn't succeed we'd always be in the red, so we were fortunate that we did make the album of our lives… and I think it is, really.

***A Night At The Opera* was definitely a very bold and adventurous album.**
It was certainly quite a leap. I don't think we realised at the time, though; it was all a natural progression. Stylistically I think it's closer to *Queen II* than *Sheer Heart Attack* as we deliberately made the latter album compressed and very slick, while A Night At The Opera was really going back to: 'This is our canvas, we will paint on it at our leisure'. Which was the philosophy behind Queen II.

You used many different studios during the recording process. Why?
It was really needs must. We had so much complexity to finish off and time was marching on. A lot of it was done separately. All those little pieces of guitars playing trumpets, clarinets and trombones on *Good Company*, I just had to just do it. Freddie would be off doing his multi-tracked harmonies by himself and on this album for the first time there was a whole period when we each went off and developed our own little areas. We were doing things that really hadn't been done before, so there was a degree of experimentation. Not everything you played got on to the tape; you had to use a selective process.

Tell us about *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Did you perceive it becoming as huge a song as it developed into?
There was always a big discussion about what would be the first single to an album. It's such a crucial decision. Whether it's a hit or not affects the whole perception and sales of the album as well as the fortunes of the group that made it for the next couple of years.

I think we always knew that Bohemian Rhapsody was, in a sense, a long shot: it would either get received extremely well or be dismissed immediately as being too complex and too long. Kenny [Everett] picked up on it, as did a few of our staff, and it just became a favourite that seemed to work.

Do you actually still like the album?
I like all the Queen albums but *A Night At The Opera* has a certain glittering quality. Not perfection as such but… something.

GETTY X2

The Greatest Showman

Foo Fighters drummer **Taylor Hawkins** on why Freddie Mercury is the ultimate rock'n'roll icon

There are some guys and girls who front bands, and you just know they're posing. You just don't believe them. Then there are the ones whom you realise that what you're getting on stage is an extension of their true personalities. Those are the great ones, and there are so few of these. But Freddie Mercury was definitely in that class.

Now, everyone always talks about his charisma and outrageous performances, but what first got me interested in him was the music. He was a brilliant musician. Could anyone else have conceived Bohemian Rhapsody? One of my earliest memories is singing along to the opera part of that song with my big sister when it came on the radio.

Freddie also took the piss out of himself, but managed to combine that with just enough pretentiousness. He came from an era when so many frontmen took themselves too seriously. But he really had a sense of humour about himself, although there had to be just enough seriousness in there as well, to allow him to go and do what he did on stage. From those 70s bands, perhaps only Peter Gabriel can rival Freddie in that respect.

The other thing was Freddie's diversity. I've actually got a bootleg of him singing with a very early band, from about 1969, and he really couldn't sing. Roger Taylor, whom I've gotten to know well, confirmed that when Queen started Freddie sounded terrible – apparently, he sounded like a sheep – because of the overactive vibrato in his voice. But in a short space of time, he taught himself, and did it amazingly. You realised just how unique he was when that tribute show happened at Wembley Stadium in 1992. All those brilliant singers, and not one was able to do everything he could do.

Queen were the first band I ever saw live. It was at Irvine Meadows in California in 1982. It was so inspiring that I went home and told my mom that one day I'd play at that venue. I never really believed that shit, but it's happened. So, I owe Freddie for helping me make a dream come true.

"Not one singer could do everything he could do."

The king of Queen, holding court (and a sawn-off mic stand).

Sheer Art Attack

Many think of **Queen** as stadium rock royalty, defined by more than two decades at the summit of popular music. But they are one of many bands on the fringes of our genre with a certain style, musicality and influence. So we ask the question, **how prog were Queen?**... Words: **Dave Everley**

On 9 January, 1971, Kevin Ayers and Genesis played a show together at the Ewell Technical College near Epsom in Surrey. Ayers was 18 months out of Soft Machine, and making a name for himself as a psychedelically-inclined art-folk rake. Genesis had released their second album, *Trespass*, a few months earlier, and were carving out a place in the vanguard of the burgeoning progressive rock movement.

There was a third band propping up the bill that night, a bunch of transplanted Londoners calling themselves Queen. In contrast to the willfully artful approach of the headliners, their music was more straightforward: a heavy, if ornate blend of Led Zeppelin's earthiness and the flights of fancy of Yes.

Not everyone in the small crowd watching them was impressed, but they caught the attention of one person. After the show, Genesis frontman Peter Gabriel pulled Queen's blond-bombshell drummer Roger Taylor to one side. Gabriel's band were about to dismiss their own drummer, John Mayhew, and were looking for a replacement. Was Taylor interested in joining Genesis? The reply was instant: thanks but no thanks. Taylor was utterly dedicated to Queen – there were gigs to play, places to go, and many musical adventures to embark on.

Had Taylor accepted the offer, the course of music – and specifically prog – would have been very different. Genesis would have flourished with Gabriel upfront, though whether they would have survived and prospered as they did without a Phil Collins to step into the breach after their talismanic singer's departure was another matter.

The knock-on effect on Queen would have been greater. Taylor was an essential part of their carefully balanced four-way chemistry; a chemistry that would go on to throw up some of the most ambitious and game-changing music ever recorded. While Queen weren't a capital 'P' prog band, they were infused with the spirit of the movement, combining its forward-looking values with its absolute disregard for the existing rules. Taking their cues from the likes of Yes, Genesis, Van der Graaf Generator and even Pink Floyd, their flamboyantly cavalier approach would go on to inspire such modern masters as Dream Theater, Queensrÿche and Muse. And, in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, they ensured that one of the biggest-selling singles in history was, at heart, a prog song. Forget the luxuriant moustaches and sawn-off mike-stands that would come to define them: if the prog ethos meant avoiding the expected, then Queen were definitely a prog band.

"Diversity was probably their greatest asset," says former Dream Theater drummer and confirmed Queen devotee Mike Portnoy. "From song to song, they could be so different. You could have something that was folk followed by something that was rockabilly followed by something that was metal. And that's one of the biggest things about prog, having that open-mindedness."

What a line up! And for 50p? Wow!

Queen's schooling in prog came early on. Brian May's very first band, 1984, played a 4am slot supporting Pink Floyd at the *Christmas On Earth Continued* all-nighter in 1967. A year later, his next outfit, Smile – also featuring Roger Taylor – played with Floyd again, this time at London's Imperial College. By the time of their gig opening for Kevin Ayers, Smile had changed their name to Queen and recruited Freddie Mercury. Collectively, they admired Yes, Van der Graaf Generator and especially Genesis.

"*Foxtrot* is a prog rock classic," Roger Taylor later wrote in the sleevenotes to Genesis box set *1970-1975*. "Arrangements were highly complex in these early days, setting a benchmark for the style of the times."

When it came to finding someone to produce their debut album, Queen's first choice was John Anthony, who had worked with both Genesis and Van der Graaf. With Anthony and co-producer Roy Thomas Baker behind the desk, the eponymous album trod heavily in Led Zeppelin's footsteps. But there was another, altogether more visionary band straining to spread their wings: *My Fairy King* was a filigreed slice of flamboyant rock'n'roll, while *Liar* metamorphosised through several different time changes and timings. ➜

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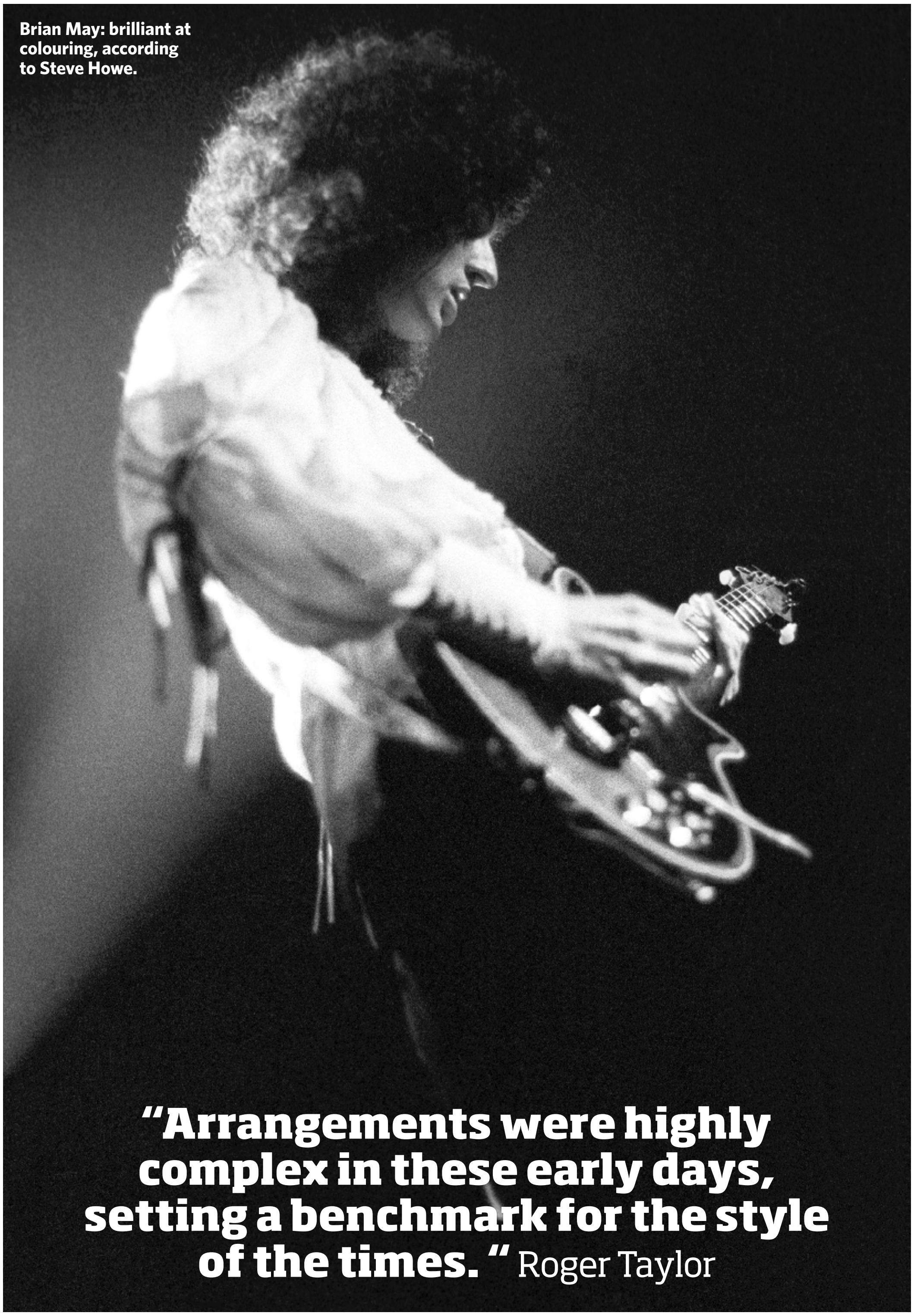
"Diversity was probably their greatest asset. From song to song, they could be so different."

Mike Portnoy



Brian May: brilliant at colouring, according to Steve Howe.

"Arrangements were highly complex in these early days, setting a benchmark for the style of the times. " Roger Taylor

REX FEATURES

Those wings were fully unfurled on the follow-up, 1974's *Queen II*. The title was the most prosaic thing about the record: the music inside was as fevered and baroque as rock gets, informed equally by Zeppelin, Yes and crazed Victorian artist Richard Dadd, whose 1864 painting *The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke* inspired one of the album's most prog-leaning tracks. It may have been rooted in the heavy rock of the times, but its cavalier approach and sheer sense of scale pegged Queen as a defiantly progressive proposition.

"Queen weren't like Yes, who had a dualistic role of guitar and keyboards, where both shared the terrain," says Yes guitarist Steve Howe, supported by Queen at Kingston Poly in early 1971. "Brian had the terrain to himself. The remarkable thing was that he was the front and the back man. It required him to come up with more than guitar solos… He had to come up with a semi-thematic approach to play the guitar. And what he did was keep colouring."

Queen's prog inclinations would be deeply woven into the fabric of their early albums, from the audacious multi-part theatrics of *Queen II's March Of The Black Queen* to the schizophrenic attack of the two-part *Lap Of The Gods* from 1974's *Sheer Heart Attack*. Even in their more commercial moments, they marched to the beat of their own drum. What other band would have dared serve up something so unusual as *Killer Queen*?

"It was their diversity," says Mike Portnoy, who first heard Queen as an eight-year-old in the mid-70s and covered many Queen songs while in Dream Theater. "Their albums took the prototype that The Beatles laid down with the *White Album*, where you had four different artists bringing in very different styles. Every song was so diverse. You get to *A Night At The Opera*, and you had this giant multi-layered epic like *Bohemian Rhapsody* next to something like *Seaside Rendezvous* or *Love Of My Life*."

A Night At The Opera was Queen's grand artistic statement and their most unashamedly prog album. Pitched around the epic twin tentpoles of *The Prophet's Song* and *Bohemian Rhapsody*, it married their far-reaching vision to a distinctly British barminess. Taken on its own, the eight-minute *The Prophets Song*, with its incredible ornate a cappella middle section, would be enough to grant Queen access to the Prog Hall Of Fame. But even that sits in the inescapable shadow of *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Time and success might have lessened its impact, but that song remains the most dazzlingly unique piece of music ever to sell five million copies.

"There are epic things that come along every so often," says Steve Howe. "There's *Sgt Pepper*, there's *Bridge Over Troubled Water*. And there's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. I don't know when I first heard it, but once it was there, it was such a formidable thing. You're thinking: 'How many tracks did they need to do those vocals? How did they write it? Who invented it? It really was astounding."

Bohemian Rhapsody encapsulated one key thing that gave Queen such a distinct identity. Like The Beatles and Beach Boys before them, they used the studio as an instrument – not least when it came to their vocals. And *Bohemian Rhapsody* raised the bar about as high as it could go.

"They sang each of those parts and triple-stacked them," says Mike Portnoy. "You heard all three of their voices singing in all three vocal ranges. That's what made the depth of their music so complex. It wasn't the instrumentation, it was the vocals. That's unusual for prog music. When I think of my favourite prog music, it's always the musicianship that draws me. But with Queen, it was the vocals. It was so deep."

For all its success, *A Night At The Opera* would be Queen's grand kiss-off to their prog roots. Later albums streamlined their sound into a more conventional format. Much like Genesis, the 80s found them swapping experimentalism for chart rock.

It wasn't until the end of their career as an active band that Queen would again sound so adventurous. During 1989 and 1990, the band began work on their

Queen, London, 1976: the day John, Freddie, Roger and Brian were recognised for their Number One single Bohemian Rhapsody.

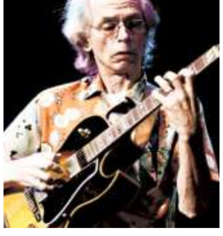
GETTY IMAGES INSET: PRESS

penultimate album, *Innuendo,* in London and Montreux. In the summer of 1990, Yes guitarist Steve Howe paid a flying visit to the Swiss city, where a chance encounter with a former guitar tech found him being invited to Queen's studio to hear the album as a work-in-progress.

"Inside, there's Freddie, Brian and Roger all sitting together. They go: 'Let's play you the album,'" says Howe. "Of course, I'm hearing it for the first time: *I Can't Live Without You*, *I'm Going Slightly Mad*. And they saved *Innuendo* itself until last. They played it and I was fucking blown away."

If that was surprising, then what happened next was utterly out-of-the-blue. The band asked if Howe wanted to play on the title track. The Yes man politely suggested they'd lost their minds. It took the combined weight of Mercury, May and Taylor to persuade him.

"They all chimed in: 'We want some crazy Spanish guitar flying around over the top. Improvise!'" recalls Howe. "I started noodling around on the guitar, and it was pretty tough. After a couple of hours, I thought: 'I've bitten off more than I can chew here.' I had to learn a bit of the structure, work out the chordal roots were, where you had to fall if you did a mad run in the distance; you have to know where you're going. But it got towards evening, and we'd doodled and I'd noodled, and it turned out to be really good fun. We have this beautiful dinner, we go back to the studio and have a listen. And they go: 'That's great. That's what we wanted."



"How many tracks did they need to do those vocals? How did they write it? Who invented it? It really was astounding." Steve Howe

Released as a single in January 1991, *Innuendo* gave Queen their third Number One single. Like *Bohemian Rhapsody* 25 years before it, it was as unlikely as hit singles get: a six-and-a-half minute musical jigsaw, complete with flamenco runs, classically-inclined orchestral overloads and maverick 5/4 timing. Queensrÿche covered the song on 2007's *Take Cover* album, while you can hear its echo in Radiohead's *Paranoid Android* and Muse's more elaborate sci-fi-tinged epics.

"In the world of rock, Queen stands out as a good example of the clash between guitar and piano in songwriting," Muse's Matt Bellamy has said. "I think that's where you stumble across those more unusual arrangements and chord structures."

Today, Queen have left a bi-polar legacy. They're arguably best known for their pop hits – *Radio Gaga*, *I Want To Break Free* and of course, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, that ultimate prog Trojan Horse. But their spirit of adventure remains unmatched by all but the boldest of their peers.

"There was no rulebook for Queen," says Mike Portnoy. "They broke most of the rules that existed, and then they wrote a new set."

AND THEY'RE OFF!

After *A Night At The Opera*, **Queen** had the world at their feet. But when it came to the follow-up *A Day At The Races*, they had two choices: more of the same or try something entirely new

Words: **Mick Wall**

Summer 1976. Eight months after *Bohemian Rhapsody* tore up the rule book for hit singles, Queen have finally – finally – released a follow-up single, *You're My best Friend*. It's a lovely pop-rock ditty, infectious and in the groove and… what the fuck? That's your follow-up to the most titanic rock song of all time?

Well, no. It would have to do for now, though, while Queen struggled fitfully to try to come up with the real follow-up to the squillion-selling album *A Night At The Opera*. The one they were bending over backwards in the studio pretending wouldn't have anything to do with being a follow-up. The one they were pretending hadn't changed a thing, but which in fact had changed everything.

Indeed, in the weeks leading up to the band going into the studio to start work on the new album, guitarist Brian May had married his girlfriend Christine Mullen at a church in Barnes, south London, and moved into a newly purchased semi nearby. Bassist John Deacon had bought a Victorian semi in Putney and moved in with his wife Veronica and their son Robert. Drummer Roger Taylor, who was even richer, having accumulated extra royalties from having written and sung the B-side to *Bohemian Rhapsody*, the otherwise pedestrian *I'm In Love With My Car,* bought a smart house in upmarket Fulham, before also acquiring a country house in Surrey. Even singer Freddie Mercury was undergoing his own kind of love-home reinvention, splitting from his long-term, live-in girlfriend Mary Austin and moving into a luxury apartment in Holland Park, buying Mary a £30,000 flat nearby.

Now, in July, the band had entered The Manor studios in Oxfordshire to record a new album, with a late summer release anticipated. But things were not going well. Having decided against bringing in Roy Thomas Baker again to produce them, they undertook the task themselves, with Gary Langan and Mike Stone engineering. "Roy's ego was exploding," Langan later recalled laughingly.

Baker would still drop by occasionally to check on their progress, but Freddie Mercury, for one, was convinced that after four Thomas Baker-produced albums, "it was now or never" if Queen really were going to try for something new.

"The thought of being in jail in tights didn't appeal to Freddie at all."

Tour manager Gerry Stickles

But with things moving much slower than they had under Baker, on some days Freddie flew into uncontrollable rages. When a UK tour planned to promote the release of the new album had to be postponed hastily, it hardly improved the pressured mood of the sessions.

To compensate, two huge outdoor shows were announced for September, at Cardiff Castle and London's Hyde Park. Two warm-up shows were also scheduled, both at Edinburgh Playhouse, a venue their manager John Reid now sponsored.

First, though, on September 5, Mercury celebrated his 30th birthday with a typically over-the-top party at a cabaret club in Chelsea, where the 150-plus guests Freddie had sent personally handwritten invitations to were treated to a caviar, lobster and Cristal champagne.

At the Cardiff show just five days later, support was supposed to come from the newly formed Ritchie Blackmore's Rainbow, but the mercurial former Deep Purple guitarist had withdrawn the band from the bill at the eleventh hour after being refused permission to use their 35-foot stage prop of a rainbow.

Not that the Queen fans seemed to care. On stage the band premiered two of the new songs they'd been working on at The Manor. The first, *Tie Your Mother Down*, with its monster-clawing riff and teased-hair vocals, became an instant live classic and a mainstay of all Queen shows that followed. The second, *You Take My Breath Away*, was an unexpectedly transcendental moment, a breathy voice-and-piano ballad that found Freddie, for once, eschewing his usual more knowing approach to lyrics for a straight-out love song, albeit not one that was either straight or specifically focused on just one individual, more a dream within a dream.

For the show in Hyde Park on September 18, which was free, more than 150,000 people showed up. Support came from Kiki Dee, Steve Hillage (yes, this was the pre-punk 70s, kids) and, opening the bill, an unknown funk-rock outfit from Liverpool called Supercharge, whose guitarist Lee Karski had been at Ealing Art College with Freddie, back when he was still known as Fred Bulsara. Karski claimed he barely recognised Mercury when they met backstage: "He'd changed so much since those days."

It wasn't the happiest day for Freddie, though. Pre-show nerves led to a full-frontal outburst from him, aimed at all the backstage liggers, screaming at them to go and watch the show. Then at the end of Queen's performance, police prevented the band from going back on stage for an encore, due to them having already overrun their allotted stage time by 30 minutes and thus broken the legally agreed curfew.

Again, Freddie's temper boiled over in a fusillade of abuse, halted only when police officers threatened to arrest him. As Queen tour manager Gerry Stickles recalled: "The thought of being in jail in tights didn't appeal to Freddie at all." ▷

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Queen with Ian Hunter (centre) and Roy Thomas Baker (right) backstage at Montreal Forum on the *A Day At The Races* tour, January 26, 1977.

Roger Taylor claimed Freddie's outbursts were just another manifestation of Queen's overweening ambition. "We always said we wanted to be the biggest band in the world," he explained. "What else are you going to say? 'We'd like to be the fourth-biggest!'"

Back in the studio, the band were determined to find the right balance between wanting to follow up *A Night At The Opera* and doing something completely new. "I thought it reeked of sequel," Roy Thomas Baker famously said at the time of the album's release.

That, though, was somewhat overstating the case. Nevertheless, Queen's fifth album certainly 'carried over' from their fourth, right down to the appropriation of another Marx Brothers film, *A Day At The Races*, for its title. It also came wrapped in a very similar sleeve, including the same crest logo and typography used on *A Night At The Opera*. Years later, Brian May conceded the point, admitting: "I wish in some ways we'd put *A Night At The Opera* and *A Day At The Races* out at the same time. The material for both of them was written at the same time, so I regard the two albums as completely parallel."

The big relief was that they didn't try to 'follow up' the two most momentous tracks on *A Night At The Opera* – the six-minute single *Bohemian Rhapsody* and the eight-minutes-plus *The Prophet's Song*. Both were self-contained epics, and anything purposely in that style would only ever have been seen as second-best.

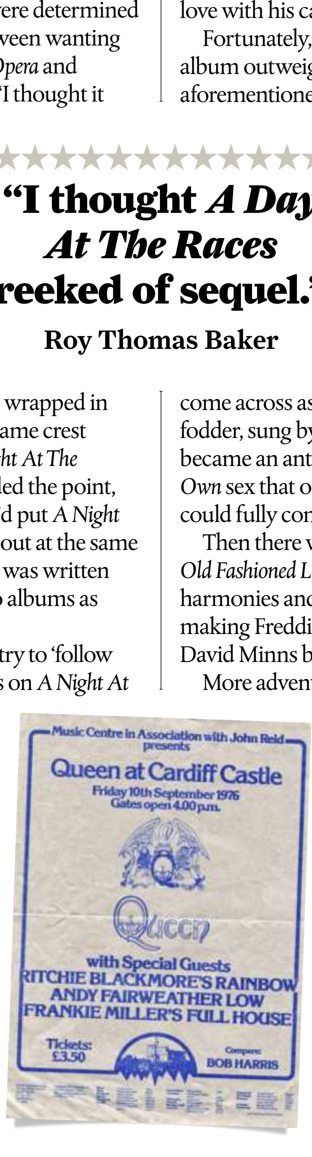
Instead, *A Day At The Races* concentrated on pushing musical boundaries while keeping the focus firmly on mainstream messaging. The album's two longest tracks – Mercury's gloriously effete *You Take My Breath Away* and May's winsome *Teo Torriatte (Let Us Cling Together)* – each barely broke five minutes. Deacon's sole songwriting contribution, *You And I*, was so limp it made his spry hit *You're My Best Friend* from *Opera* sound like *Smoke On The Water*. Similarly, Taylor's one-song vocal and writer credit, *Drowse*, saw the drummer not so much in love with his car as sleeping it off in the back seat.

"I thought *A Day At The Races* reeked of sequel."

Roy Thomas Baker

Fortunately, the good stuff on the new album outweighed the drab. There was the aforementioned *Tie Your Mother Down*. Brian May had written the hooky guitar riff years before, while working a summer job at an observatory in Tenerife. The words were an afterthought. "I thought it was a crap title," he later confessed. "But Freddie said it meant something to him." Indeed while May's lyrics may have come across as typically misogynistic sub-Stones fodder, sung by a tongue-in-arse-cheek Freddie, it became an anthem to the kind of verboten *Boy's Own* sex that only two acne-smeared teenage studs could fully comprehend.

Then there was the pop-rock apotheosis *Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy*, its pure Queen vocal harmonies and tippity-top use of ragtime jazz making Freddie's paean to his then boyfriend David Minns bounce like a lubed balloon.



More adventurous though equally joyous was the singer's jaunty musical portrait of the band's manager John Reid, *The Millionaire's Waltz*. At Mercury's behest, May spent weeks creating a swathe of orchestrated guitar sounds, which, coupled with the luxuriant bed of harmony vocals that had become the band's trademark, propelled what began as a piano romp into a full-scale rocktastic workout, the kind that only Queen could have done so convincingly, and with such seemingly straight faces.

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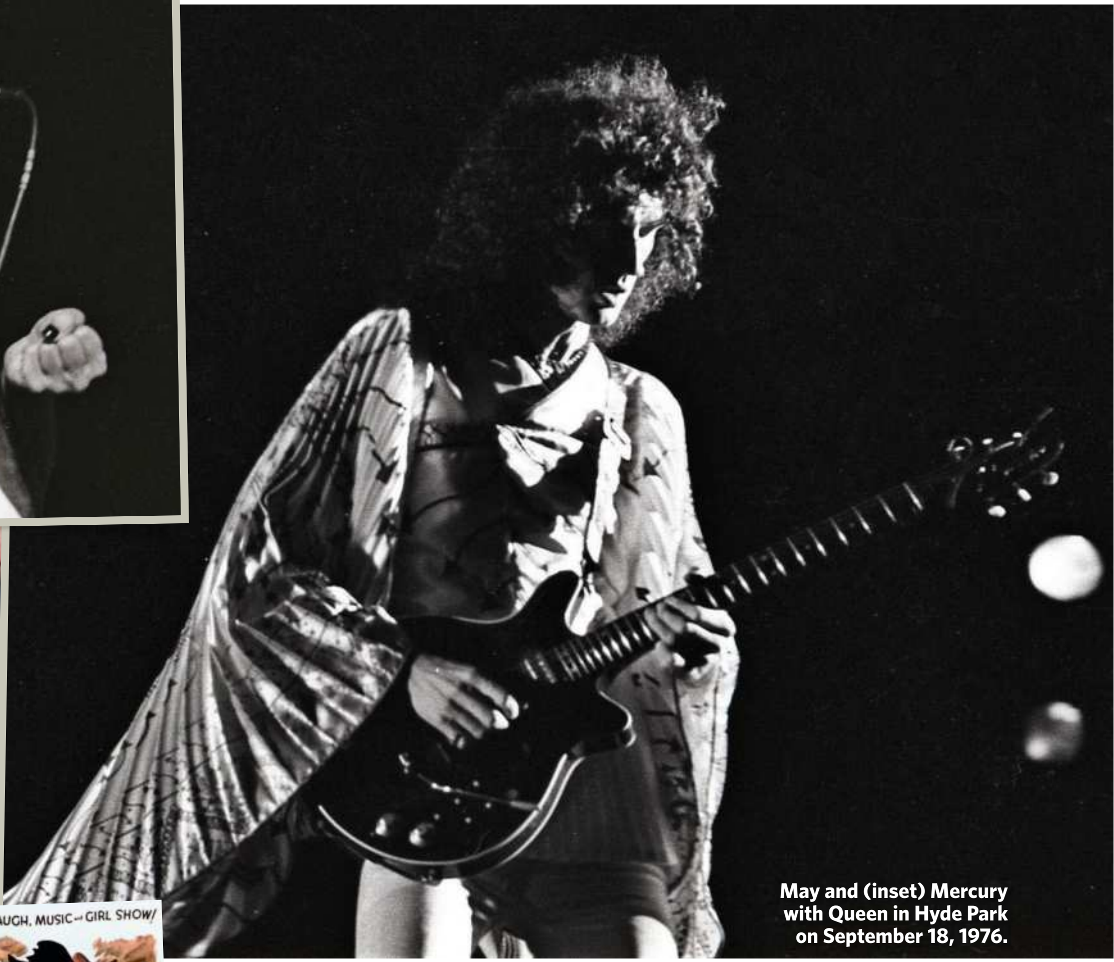
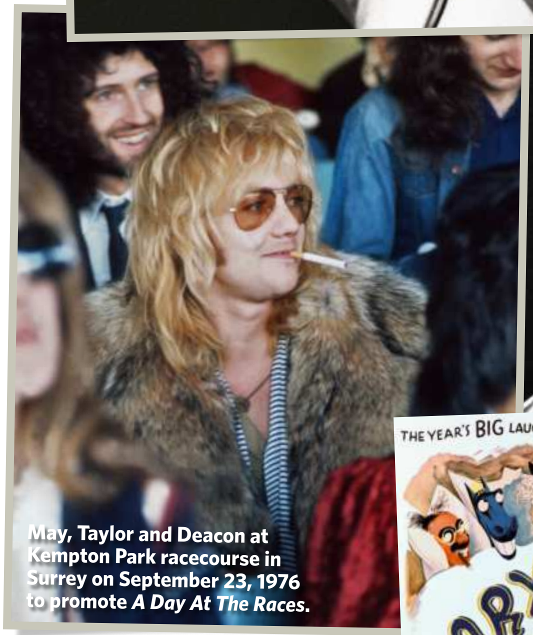
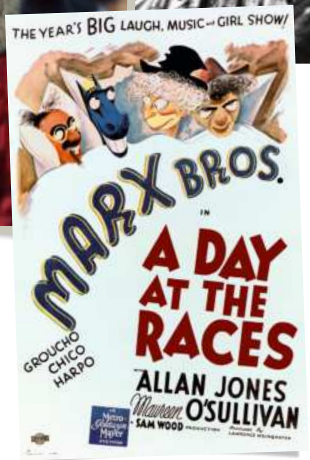


May and (inset) Mercury with Queen in Hyde Park on September 18, 1976.



May, Taylor and Deacon at Kempton Park racecourse in Surrey on September 23, 1976 to promote *A Day At The Races*.



And of course there was rock with a capital 'R'. The days of white queens and fairy kings may have been long gone for Queen, but that didn't prevent Brian May from bringing out the lead when it suited him. The lyrics to *White Man* – a cry for justice on behalf of Native American Indians – may be horribly cringe-inducing to modern ears, but you could say that about the lyrics of almost every rock band from the same mid-70s period. Those mountainous guitars and drums, though, they do not lie.

The album's finest moment, by far, of course, and one of the most transcendent moments in the history of rock, was *Somebody To Love*. At the time, it became characterised as this album's *Bohemian Rhapsody*. That is, the pivotal track, its multi-layered harmony vocals and butterflying Mozartian piano the very essence of what had most intrigued the world about *Bo Rap*.

Yet it was different in so many ways. Those extravagant vocals, for example, weren't conceived from opera, but from gospel. As John Deacon later explained, *Somebody To Love* proved that "Queen could swing as hard as it could rock, by channelling the spirit of gospel music".

Specifically, that of Aretha Franklin and Ray Charles. Freddie had long adored Aretha. Every white rock musician worth his salted peanuts had long admired Brother Ray. Nevertheless, listening to Queen take on soul and gospel seemed like an even bigger stretch than them trying opera for size.

But it worked. Oh, how it worked! A 'throw in the kitchen sink'-sized epic that spoke of loneliness, love, God and devotion, with big piano chords, vigorous guitar flourishes and vocals that range from full voice to falsetto, it was also, as Roger Taylor later described it, "the loosest track we've ever done". That is, it may have been manicured in the studio to within an inch of its ultra-contrived life, yet somehow when sung and played out in the open, on stage or in the intimate cathedral of one's own bedroom, *Somebody To Love* was one of the greatest self-actualising songs of the century.

As Brian May would later reveal: "That was part of Freddie's great gift: to take a song and keep building it until it almost became something else. Until it belonged to everybody. *Somebody To Love* was like that."

"You mustn't look too closely at what we do. It will only make you go blind."
Freddie Mercury

It certainly felt that way when it was released as the first single from *A Day At The Races*, racing to No.2 in the UK chart and gliding into the US Top 10. The album, released two weeks before Christmas 1976, enjoyed similar chart success. It was launched with a major blow-out afternoon of free-everything excess at Kempton Park racetrack. Eighty-six-year-old Groucho Marx sent them a congratulatory telegram: "I know that you are very successful recording artists. Could it, by any chance, be your sage choice of album titles?"

A Day At The Races became Queen's second No.1 album in Britain, their first No.1 album in Japan, where the band now enjoyed Beatles-like stardom, and their second US top-five album.

It didn't match the door-crashing-open success of its history-making predecessor, but it remains the most brilliantly realised non-follow-up follow-up ever. Critically it suffered, having arrived in the wake of first singles from the Sex Pistols and The Damned, being dismissed in the *NME* as "grotesquery of the first order". But no one remembers that now. Instead, what we recall are the scope of Queen's musical ambition, the utter cheek of Freddie Mercury's proclamations, on stage and in the press, and the beautiful bombast and charm of the music of May, Deacon and Taylor.

And how things never really were quite the same again. Within a couple of years, everyone except May would have cut their hair, Freddie would be swapping the make-up for the beginnings of a cop-bar tash, and Queen would be pruning their music to a more punk-for-purpose size, or abandoning it completely to 'go disco'. Even then we didn't know half the story.

Right, Freddie? "You mustn't look too closely at what we do," he once announced grandly. "It will only make you go blind."

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Playing The Red Special

Brian May's **Red Special guitar** is one of the most iconic instruments on the planet. Writer Simon Bradley has been fortunate enough to play this piece of rock'n'roll history

How the love affair between a young Brian May and guitar music began will be familiar to most who grew up suburban England in the late fifties. Be it the Little Richard 45s he played on a friend's Dansette record player, the crooners coming from the family radio or experimental strums of his father's banjolele, something awoke inside the quiet, somewhat introverted, only child and the seeds were sown.

"I could hear guitar music in my head and I wanted a guitar more than anything in the world," he says. On his seventh birthday, his parents presented him with an Egmond acoustic, an instrument he still owns. "It was amazing, pure magic. I can still smell the varnish!"

He was soon hankering after an electric guitar and, with the music of Les Paul and Howling Wolf ringing in his ears, he began to conceptualise the construction of one of his own; his dream guitar, a Fender Stratocaster, was well beyond his financial resources. With help from his father Harold, a talented electronics engineer, he set to work.

Every part of the Red Special was meticulously designed from the ground up and it took 18 months to construct. Domestic bric a brac was used within the build, such as pearl buttons pilfered from his mother's sewing kit for the fingerboard's fret markers and, most famously, a piece of mahogany that once formed part of a fireplace for the neck, and the guitar was finished in October 1964.

Incredibly, 55 years later, the guitar still works and, with just one or two exceptions, it has appeared on every single song Queen has ever recorded and every stage they've ever graced.

The guitar exudes a palpable vibe and, if you're ever given the chance to play it, as I have, you can't help feeling that you're holding some sort of terrifyingly fragile religious relic in your trembling hands. The neck is truly colossal in size while the string action is almost ridiculously low, but bashing out simple chords is a life-affirming experience.

I've played Rory Gallagher's battered Strat, Steve Vai's #1 Ibanez JEM and Bernie Marsden's 1959 Gibson Les Paul but nothing compares to strumming the Red Special. It has formed the cornerstone of Queen's entire canon and, terrible cliché though it undeniably is, it truly does have a kind of magic.

Brian May onstage with the Red Special.

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TAKING ON THE WORLD

In the autumn of 1977, it looked as if **Queen**'s reign might be over. Instead the band rose to the challenge, hit back with the globally successful *News Of The World* album and ruled once more.

Words: **Mick Wall**

Friday, October 28, 1977. It should have been the day that marked the end of Queen's reign. The future of their sixth studio album, *News Of The World*, released that day, looked bleak at best. A year before, their previous album, *A Day At The Races*, had received such a critical battering that Freddie Mercury's days of bringing opera to the masses, darling, now seemed decidedly numbered.

A Day At The Races, the follow-up to *A Night At The Opera* – their *Bo Rap*-containing 1975 breakthrough international hit – was considered flaccid by comparison. The moment where the group's desire to push the musical envelope crumbled into self-indulgent parody. The worst accusation of all: that Queen in the studio had begun to tread water; that having found the magic formula for success they now simply joined the dots and offered up the same again – only not different.

At a time when punk rock was considered the new critical yardstick, Queen suddenly epitomised everything about the old rock aristocracy that was now held in contempt: massive production, back-arching guitars and the once glorious, now oddly out of step image of Freddie Mercury preening in front of the audience, wishing them all "champagne for breakfast".

As if to ram the point home, on the very same day that *News Of The World* was released came *Never Mind The Bollocks… Here's The Sex Pistols*. The vast gulf between what was now regarded as the spiky, blades-drawn future and the flatulent, fairy-dust past was thrown into even sharper relief when one compared Johnny Rotten's *God Save The Queen* with Queen's own bombastic version of the national anthem which still closed their shows.

> **"The most popular misconception is that Freddie took himself seriously."**
> **Brian May**

Speaking with me some years later, Brian May – the former PhD student studying Motions Of Interplanetary Dust, who'd fashioned his favourite guitar out of a fireplace, which he played with an old sixpenny piece for a plectrum – insisted that the band had remained impressively unmoved by such accusations. He gave a knowing chuckle as he recalled: "The most popular misconception of people outside the people who 'get it', as you would say, is that Freddie took himself seriously. They didn't understand that although he took his work incredibly seriously, there was always that element of self-parody, if you like, in Freddie. He was always slightly tongue-in-cheek, there was always a little twinkle in his eye. And I think that's what was missed by the outside world. It never mattered to Freddie, though. It never bothered him. It was like, they either get it or they don't."

In fact, what nobody had anticipated when *News Of The World* was released in the punk-dominated autumn of 1977 was exactly how much we were about to 'get it' from Queen – to the tune of seven million sales worldwide, making it the most successful Queen album to date.

"After that we stopped worrying about punk or what the critics had to say," Roger Taylor told me. "We stopped worrying about anything…"

Although Queen were loath to admit it, the thinking behind *News Of The World* had in fact been more than a little influenced by the lacklustre reception *A Day At The Races* had received – and not just from the critics. Designed very much as what their former producer Ray Thomas Baker decried as a record that "absolutely screamed 'sequel'", it had sold less than a third of what *A Night At The Opera* had sold in both Britain and America, and less than half what it had sold worldwide. Not a flop, but not "the way things should be going", as Taylor delicately put it. May reluctantly conceded that it "may have been over-produced".

Any thoughts of simply aiming for a third bite of the same formulaic cheery were finally dashed when Groucho Marx refused them permission to call the album *Duck Soup*, which would have been the third time in a row they had 'borrowed' the ▷

GETTY

May takes photos in stereo…

…while Taylor and Deacon try to figure out how to use a Polaroid camera.

title of a Marx Brothers film. In fact Marx responded by saying they could have the title of his next movie, though: *The Rolling Stones Greatest Hits*.

Whatever they did next, it became abundantly clear to everyone in Queen that the follow-up to *A Day At The Races* would have to be something a little different. They had taken more than three weeks to record *Bohemian Rhapsody*. Now, though, the buzz word around the new album was 'spontaneity'. To try to enforce this new sense of purpose, a mere two months were booked at Notting Hill's hip Basing Street Studios and Wessex Sound Studios, a former Victorian church in North London, with all writing and recording completed between July and September. With an American tour booked for November they would have to work faster than at any time before.

To help kick-start the sessions, Roger Taylor brought in demos of two tracks he'd recorded on his own earlier that summer. The first, *Sheer Heart Attack*, originally aborted from the sessions for the album of the same name in 1974, here with the drummer on lead vocals (replaced on the final album version by Mercury), and redirected as Taylor's 'answer' to punk. Punchy, repetitive, two-chord fury: *'Well you're just seventeen and all you wanna do is disappear/You know what I mean there's a lot of space between your ears…'* That told them snot-gobblers.

The second, *Fight From The Inside*, was essentially more of the same, although set against a less impatient, rock-steady beat, with Taylor kept on lead vocals, and again having a not-so-sly dig at the punks who saw the 28-year-old idol as now somehow past it. *'You're just another picture on a teenage wall, you're just another sucker ready for a fall…'*

It was the band's principle songwriters, Mercury and May, who came up with the most potent ripostes to any claim that Queen had lost their mojo, with two of the finest, most memorable and long-lasting tracks (after *Bohemian Rhapsody*) of their career: May's *We Will Rock You* and Mercury's *We Are The Champions*, both of which open the album, in that order.

A delicious coincidence, perhaps, but the fact that both tracks used the pronoun 'We' said a great deal about how the band saw themselves in terms of their own loyal fan base, and the slings and arrows they had suffered on their behalf. *We Will Rock You*, with its captivating 'boom-boom-tush' rhythm and whiplash vocals, topped off by that marvellously bugling guitar solo, was the first real rock anthem to gain traction since the heyday of what we now think of as classic rock. Populist, all-inclusive, this was the 'come on in, the water's fine' rock anthem at its most affecting. A song for the people to sing along to; to clap their hands and stamp their feet to. To march to! So much so that Queen would open every show they have ever done with it from then until their US tour this summer.

> **"There was always this challenge of how far can we push things in any direction."**
>
> **Brian May**

The 'We' in *We Are The Champions* was again meant as a you and me, in it together, banner call, but with more subtle, reflective intentions. Whatever the putative subject matter, Freddie's best songs were always, ultimately, about his favourite subject: himself. So, too, *Champions*, yet with its lines about having *'paid my dues'* and *'done my sentence, but committed no crime'* Freddie both invites us in to share his lonely bubble, and speaks up for us with his defiant declaration that *'we'* are the champions, *'my friends'*, before paying the ultimate compliment when he sings, in his quavering sotto voice: *'You brought me fame and fortune, and everything that goes with it/I thank you all.'* Cue monumental guitar fresco. Towering emotions. Heart pounding, arms-aloft salutes, rivers of man-love… Seated at the piano, head thrown back like Judy Garland, Freddie would be both martyr to the cause and friend-indeed.

"I can understand some people saying *We Are The Champions* was bombastic," allowed May some years later. "But it wasn't saying Queen are the champions, it was saying all of us are. It made the concert like a football match, but with everyone on the same side."

Or as Freddie put it laughingly in an interview with the *Daily Mail* in the aftermath of the album's gigantic success: "To some people I'm still a bitch. I enjoy being a bitch. I enjoy being surrounded by bitches. I certainly don't go looking for the most perfect people. I'd find that boring. I'm like a mad dog about town. I like to enjoy life."

In a shrewd move as ever, *We Are The Champions* and *We Will Rock You* were paired as a double-A-

Taking a back seat. But Mercury and May were in the driving seat when it came to the songwriting for *NOTW*.

side first single from the album. It became Queen's second-biggest-selling hit of all time, spending six months solid on the US chart and eventually sold more than five million copies there.

Such success could not have been taken for granted, though, while they hurriedly tried to finish the album by their self-imposed impossible deadline. Initially working out of Basing Street, where Bob Marley And The Wailers had just completed the *Exodus* album, the band scurried for ideas. In the end, Mercury contributed only three songs, *Champions, My Melancholy Blues* and *Get Down Make Love,* an overheated sex song that hints heavily at the singer's personal evolution from beautiful girls to handsome boys: *'You say you're hungry, I give you meat, I suck your mind, you blow my head…'* What these days might be called a little too much information. But thanks anyway, Freddie, for clearing that up.

"The subject of Freddie's sexuality never came up because it wasn't even mentioned within [the band]," Brian May later insisted to me. "Basically, because none of us had any idea that he might be different from us. Is that saying it the right way? I mean, we shared lots of flats and stuff, and I've seen Freddie disappear into rooms with lots of girls and screams would emerge, so, you know, we assumed that everything was fairly much the same way as we knew it. It was only very much later that we realised there was anything else going on with Freddie. I mean much, much later. We were on tour in the States – I don't even know what date that would have been, but on some fairly big tour – and suddenly he's got boys following him into a hotel room instead of girls. We're thinking, 'Hhmmm…'" he laughed affectionately. "And that's about the extent of it. Even then, obviously, it was never a problem. I always had plenty of gay friends, I just didn't realise that Freddie was one of them until much later."

In fact, by 1977 Freddie's sexuality had become abundantly clear to everyone around Queen. He had almost been publicly outed two years before, when a writer in Ohio was shown into Freddie's hotel room half an hour early and found him reclining on a pile of cushions, being fussed over by a group of barely-clad muscle-boys. "These are my servants, dear," Freddie had casually explained.

Although he still enjoyed the close friendship of former girlfriend Mary Austin, he had now bought

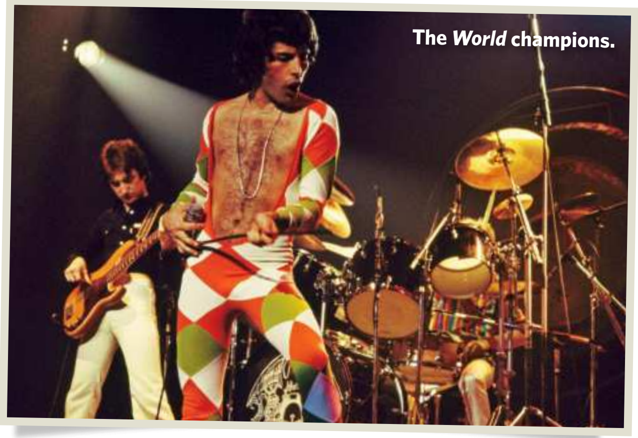
Mary a luxury penthouse flat of her own in London, while he brought a new special friend, David Minns, into his home. By the time of recording *News Of The World*, though, Freddie had replaced Minns with a young American called Joe Fanelli.

"After seven and a half years," he and Mary had "come to an understanding," Mercury told a reporter in 1978. "I felt that as I'm on tour so much, Mary should have a life of her own."

Was this his way of saying they now enjoyed an 'open' relationship? "I'll go to bed with anything," he replied. "My sex drive is enormous. I live life to the full." Or, as he put it in an interview in 1976: "I sleep with men, women, cats, you name it."

The other song he wrote for the new album, *My Melancholy Blues,* was a ritzy-piano jazz-age pastiche with no backing vocals or guitars, just Freddie crooning like an old roué, a pebble beach of champagne corks at his feet, the first light of dawn peeping through the . curtains of his four-poster bedroom.

Indeed Freddie was now splitting his time between the recording studio and Sotheby's, buying an array of expensive antiques and trinkets, filling his Kensington home with Erte prints, Hokusai woodcuts and lacquered Japanese furniture. It was the same on tour, with various crew members recalling numerous occasions when Freddie would arrive breathless at the airport minutes before departure, with a cavalcade of assistants bearing antique furniture, ▷



The *World* champions.

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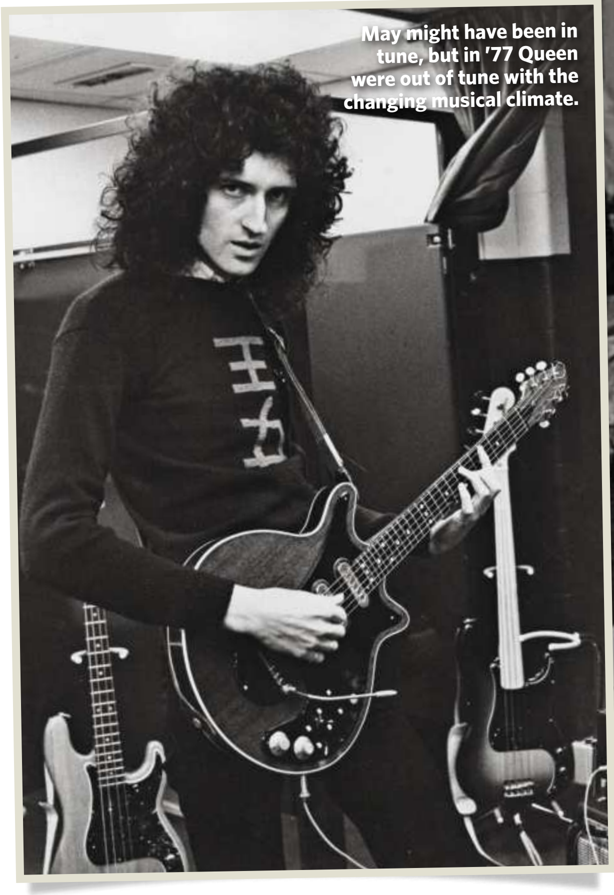


May might have been in tune, but in '77 Queen were out of tune with the changing musical climate.

"I've got an idea for the cover, fellas..." Taylor with a 1953 issue of the comic *Astounding Science Fiction*.

objets d'art, trunks full of clothes and the traditional wooden dolls which he liked to collected, and screech at his tour manager: "Freight it!"

In Japan the promoter would arrange for huge department stores to be opened specially for him at night, so he could go shopping without harassment. "The Japanese call it 'crazy shopping'," Freddie boasted. "All these assistants standing there and the place is entirely empty except for me."

But then he could afford such extravagances. By 1977 when *News Of The World* was being bolted together, they all could. Such was the combined total of their record sales and concert tour receipts in America that they were all earning individual annual salaries of around £500,000 (approximately £3.3m in today's money.).

As Freddie was happy to tell one reporter: "Darling, I'm simply dripping with money! It may be vulgar, but it's wonderful."

> **"*We Are The Champions* wasn't saying Queen are the champions, it was saying all of us are."**
>
> **Brian May**

Brian May did the real heavy lifting in terms of songwriting on the album, contributing four tracks, including *We Will Rock You*, two of which, *All Dead, All Dead* and *Sleeping On The Sidewalk*, he also sang lead vocals on – the first time it really hit home just how close May's voice was to Mercury's. The former is a lovely, gently paced piano ballad, with a haunting guitar figure coming like weak sunlight halfway through. The overall effect was not hampered in the least by the fact that the lyric was, May explained, "partially inspired" by the death of a beloved pet cat.

Sleeping On The Sidewalk sounds exactly like what it was: an impromptu jam on a day when Mercury wasn't in the studio, the guitarist indulging his Led Zeppelin blues-jam tendencies, with bassist John Deacon audibly hitting occasional bum notes and May chuckling heartily at the end of the track. Legend has it that the band didn't even know they were being recorded, but May would eventually cast doubt on that, although he did confirm that the track was recorded live in the studio, with his American-accented vocals added later. It's the sort of knock-about jam you might hear any rock band lean into during a quiet moment at soundcheck.

May's other contribution was made of much more substantial stuff. Indeed *It's Late* was one of the major highlights of *News Of The World*. At more than six minutes long, this was his idea, he explained, for a song conceived and performed as a three-act theatrical play – to the point where the verses are called 'acts' on the accompanying lyric sheet. But this was no prog extravaganza à la the 'black' and 'white' sides of *Queen II*. The guitars on *It's Late* are low-slung one moment, high-stepping the next, showing off the same 'tapping' technique that Eddie Van Halen would make such a virtue of when his band's debut *Van Halen* was released months later. (May revealed that he got the idea for the 'tapping' from a Texas guitarist named Rocky Athas, who he'd caught playing at Dallas club Mother Blues the previous year.)

Mercury sings this one, bringing the full force of his catlike vocals to the task.

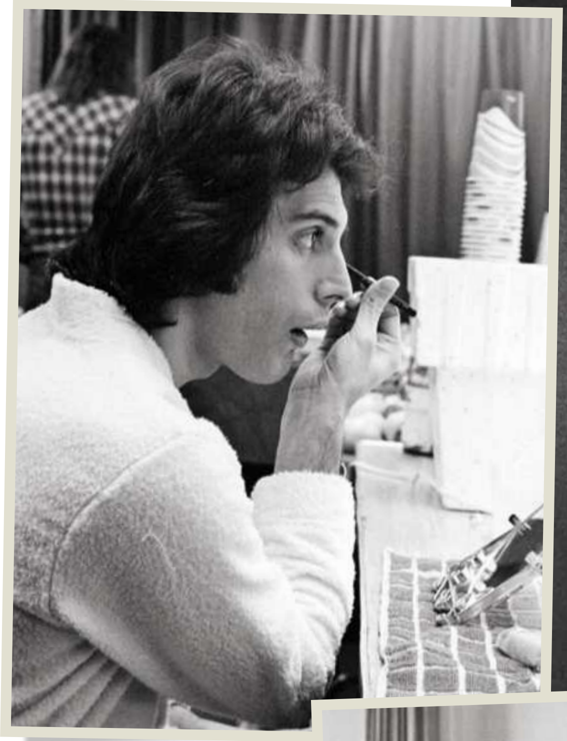
"It's another one of those story-of-your life songs," May would later explain via queenpedia.com. "I think it's about all sorts of experiences that I had, and experiences that I thought other people had, but I guess it was very personal. It's written in three parts. It's like the first part of the story is at home, the guy is with his woman. The second part is in a room somewhere, the guy is with some other woman, that he loves, and can't help loving. The last part is he's back with his woman."

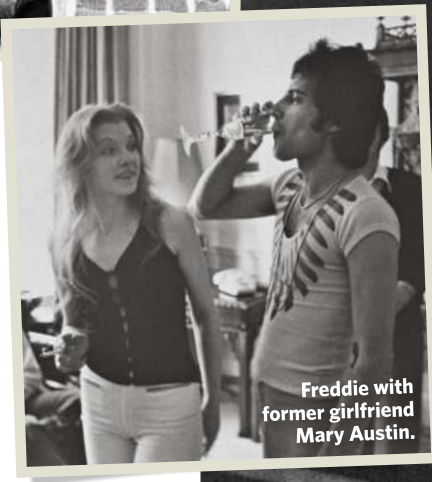
John Deacon contributed two of the album's best tracks in *Spread Your Wings* and *Who Needs You*. The latter is an utterly charming Spanish stroll, with Mercury's vocals panned entirely to one audio channel, and May and Deacon's Spanish guitars over on the other. Ah, the endless joys of stereo. Hard to fathom such simple pleasures now, but throw in May's maracas and Mercury's cowbell and you have the kind of track only Queen could have come up with in 1977.

Better still was *Spread Your Wings*. Destined to become the first Queen single without backing vocals, it was the follow-up single to *We Will Rock You/We Are The Champions*, and it understandably suffered by comparison. It bothered the world's charts not at all, yet it's one of the most masterful and affecting power ballads on the album.

"I suppose it seems like there's a rule that Freddie and I divide up most of the album, but it's not," May told British writer Mick Houghton. "John is a very slow writer, Roger has more material than the group has done, but it's just a question of choosing material to give each album the right balance. There are no hard and fast rules.

"In terms of contribution, the creative balance has shifted to become much more of a group thing… This is a very crucial time for the group. It's the point where it would be easy for us to go off and do separate things. But our strength, and that of any group, is that you realise how to use each other in that complementary fashion. That's the most important thing we have. It works not only on the music side, where we work on all the arrangements, but in the writing,





Freddie with former girlfriend Mary Austin.

The shy, retiring Freddie in his element and in sparkling form.

and in the very important psychological side where you're holding each other together on tour.

"We've come to know each other's strengths and weakness and can play off one another. It's a very delicate balance, and I'm very aware that it could very easily be upset by something even from outside which threatens the band internally. That's why it worries me if the media concentrate on me or Freddie. John and Roger are crucial to everything we do, they're not only a rhythm section. Nothing is farther from the truth. It's like John is the quiet one. All the press things about John say that, and it's true in many areas, but in others he's very much the leader."

The *News Of The World* tour opened in Portland, Maine, on November 11, 1977. With all 8,600 tickets sold out at the Cumberland County Civic Center, Queen unveiled their most spectacular stage show yet. Now touring with more than 60 tons of equipment, including a specially modified Crown lighting rig that had first been unveiled at the Earls Court gigs the previous June, this was to be lights, smoke, mirrors and the unsurpassable vision of Freddie Mercury in his absolute prime. The cost of building the production alone was more than £55,000 (roughly £350,000 in today's money), a fortune at a time when most rock shows cost a fraction of that. Day-to-day running costs came to nearly £5,000 (approx £30,000 today). It meant the tour would make a profit only in the huge American arenas Queen were now headlining, and actually lose money when they brought the whole shebang to Britain and Europe in 1978.

Apart from the spectacular production, the most obvious difference between Queen on tour now was their hair: with the exception of Brian May, who continued to wear his hair long, all the band members now sported short, on-trend hair. Another response to punk fashion, when John Deacon had been the first to trim his locks at the start of the year the others had laughed. Now, though, the even more fashion-conscious Taylor and Mercury followed suit. Not Sid Vicious spiky, my dear, don't be silly, more like a mid-70s 'getting good at the back' David Essex.

Sartorially they were also in 'transition', with only May still clinging steadfastly to his bell-bottom trousers, shoulder-peaked blouson and clogs, while Deacon now favoured skinny ties and Taylor vacillated between the two extremes, depending on his mood.

Even Freddie had shortened his noir-mane, although only as far as his shoulders, which along with the fulsome bushy sideburns gave him what local London barbers in those days referred to as 'an Elvis'. Of course, he hadn't stopped there, taking everything one step further by going on stage each night in a succession of different-coloured harlequin cat suits (or Nijinsky ballet costumes, as he had scolded the *NME*) open from throat to navel to reveal his impressively hirsute chest. "I'm into this ballet thing," he said. "That's why I'm trying to put across this Nijinsky costume; and trying to put across our music in a more artistic manner than before. A lot of people just dismiss it and say I'm wearing a silly little outfit, rather than being critical and saying that formal ballet may not be quite right for rock'n'roll."

When the *NME* ran the interview they did so under the headline: Is This Man A Prat? It was a theme that Sid Vicious took up with Freddie personally one evening during the making of *News Of The World*.

In a rather wonderful you-couldn't-make-it-up twist of fate, both Queen and the Sex Pistols had been recording their respective albums at ▷

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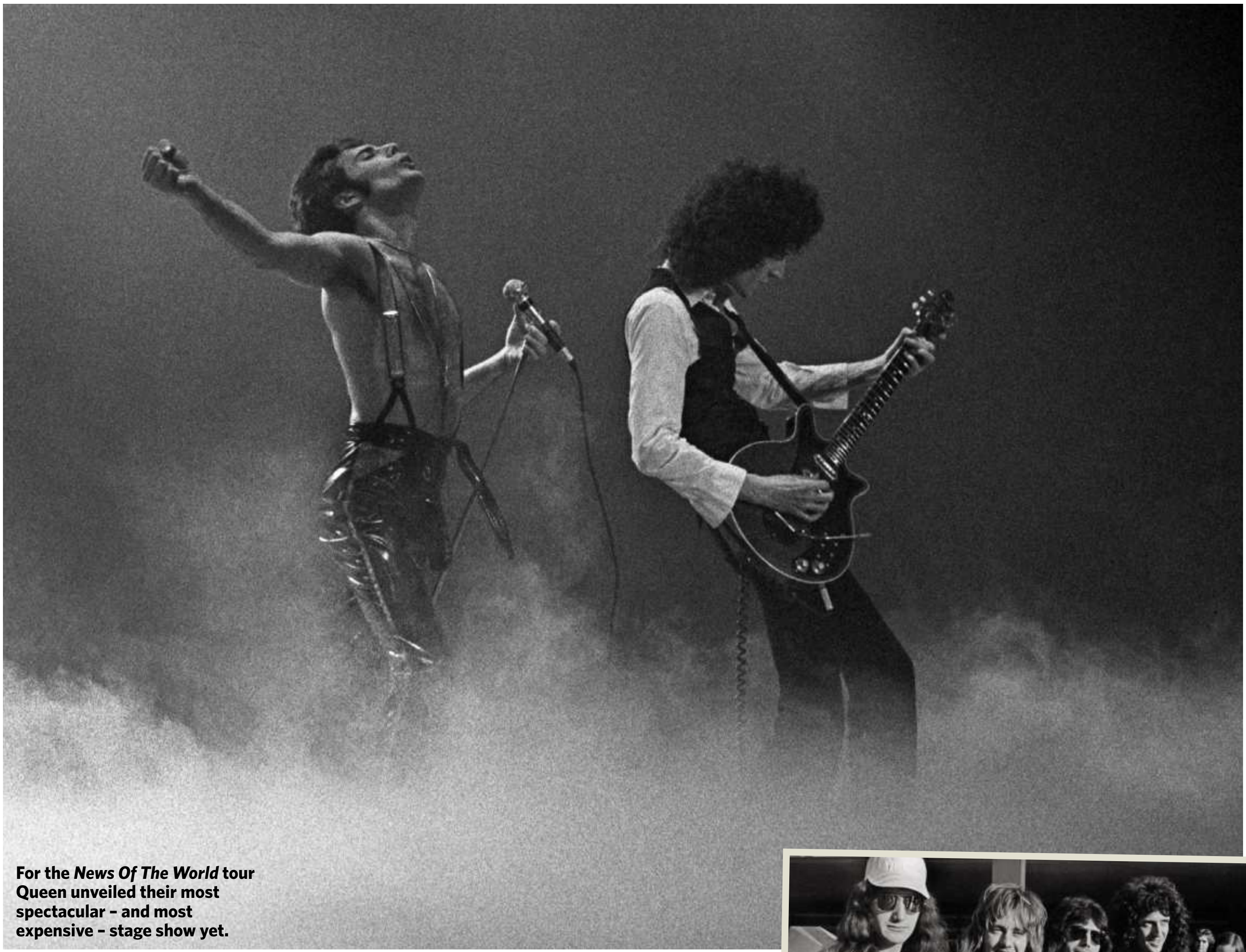

For the *News Of The World* tour Queen unveiled their most spectacular – and most expensive – stage show yet.

Millionaire's row: Deacon, Taylor, Mercury and May.

Wessex Studios that summer, the latter in the less plush Studio B. When Sid, in his usual bravura mood of offensive jollity, wandered into a Queen session where Freddie was tinkling nonchalantly at the ivories, he offered the greeting: "Have you succeeded in bringing ballet to the masses yet?" To which Freddie replied: "Ah yes, Mister Ferocious, my dear, we're doing our best." Then had him thrown out.

What Sid didn't know (he hadn't yet replaced Glen Matlock in the group) was that in another strange conflation of destinies, it was Queen who had been indirectly responsible for one of the career-defining moments of the Pistols' career when they turned down a spot on Thames TV's evening magazine show *Today* at the last minute. So EMI sent their latest signings, the Sex Pistols, to fill the slot with the show's notoriously louche presenter, Bill Grundy. A real sliding-doors moment in rock history if ever there was one.

Queen had first unveiled their new look when they performed a one-off mini-concert at London's New Theatre on October 6, in order to shoot the video for *We Are The Champions*, when members of the Queen fan club who'd agreed to come to the show were rewarded with advance copies of the *Rock/Champions* single. On stage in America, though, May was still performing his 15-minute guitar solo and Freddie was still camping it up, even if he did now throw the occasional leather jacket over his ballet costume.

"We stopped worrying about punk or what the critics had to say. We stopped worrying about anything."

Roger Taylor

Of course, a lot of the real fun on a Queen tour was now taking place off stage after the show. Led Zeppelin and the Rolling Stones might have set the benchmark for on-tour excess-all-areas in the 70s, but Queen seemed determined to uphold the tradition, punk be damned, by raising the bar several notches higher.

"As soon as we made it," Mercury said at the time, "we knew there were no longer any limits on what we could do." Or as May told *Classic Rock* in 2011: "It was deliberately excessive. Partly for our own enjoyment, partly for friends to enjoy, partly because it's exciting for record company people, and partly for the hell of it."

Queen's 24-date November/December 1977 US tour was such a triumph that even Mercury wondered – albeit only briefly – how they would ever top it. It was full of landmarks such as the two sold-out nights at New York's Madison Square Garden on December 1 and 2, and another two equally speedily sold-out shows at the Los Angeles Forum on December 21 and 22, and they were now making money hand-over-fist every time they stepped on stage. For their two sold-out shows at the 11,000-capacity Cobo Hall in Detroit, they picked off ticket receipts of $184,477 (approx. $750,000 now). For a show at the Boston Garden they were paid $122,959 (nearly $500,000 now).

The money was now pouring in so fast that in order not to hand over a lot of it to the tax man they were advised to become tax exiles from Britain. But

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again Mercury just flashed those famous teeth and laughed. "I've just been going on wild spending sprees," he declared. "I've been told to cool down because the taxman will be coming to take a large sum away. I've spent in the region of a hundred thousand pounds over the last three years."

Originally there had been tentative plans to take the *News Of The World* tour to Japan at the beginning of 1978. Queen had been big in Japan, with *A Night At The Opera* having bestowed Beatles-like status on them. Brian May recalled touching down in Tokyo for the first time, in 1975, and being greeted by more than 5,000 fans. "We had to be lifted over the heads of the fans," he said, just to get to their waiting limos. An even bigger Japanese tour had taken place in 1976 after *A Day At The Races* went to No.1. Now, with *NOTW* sitting pretty at No.3, the decision to return seemed obvious. Yet they didn't go for it.

Whatever the reason for not going to Japan, the first few months of 1978 were kept gig-free. Then, in April, came a six-week tour of Europe, before returning, at last, to Britain for five shows in May: the first two at the Bingley Hall in Stafford, followed by three nights at London's Empire Pool (now known as Wembley Arena).

With Mercury now shunning most music-paper interviews in favour of newspapers and highbrow magazines, this was to be the start of the era of Queen as aloof, unstoppable celebrity entities, far beyond the reach of greasy newsprint weeklies with their sanctimonious attitudes and grim new devotion to anti-rock.

It was the era in which the band journeyed so far down the rabbit hole of an unbridgeable fame that it would eventually reach its toxic nadir in 1984 with their now infamous shows at Sun City in Cape Town, South Africa. Only Bob Geldof's bold decision to include them as a major part of the massive Live Aid show at Wembley Stadium the following year offered Queen redemption.

But by then their American fame had withered on the vine – again shot down by Mercury's hubris, pushing the band into a more disco direction with the *Hot Space* album and flaunting his now outré homosexuality: the tash that just kept giving, the growing bald spot, the tongue-in-cheek that more and more came to resemble simple contempt for his audience – to the point where mainstream American rock audiences now looked to more obvious, more safe role models like Van Halen and Journey for their ass-kicks.

"It's true that to us there were no boundaries," May would later tell me. "Alongside trying to never tread the same ground twice, there was always this great challenge of how far can we push things in any direction. You want to be able to explore what's coming to you in the way of inspiration. It was a difficult compromise to find, but always worth finding once you did find it."

The News Of The World album, though, would, in time, offer up its own unique Queen legacy. When, in 2001, Queen premiered their new stage musical, giving it the title *We Will Rock You* was an inspired choice. It seemed to say: we are here not to offer up a rhapsody, or a parody, of any kind. We are to simply entertain you. To rock you. Because we are – and always will be – the champions at this sort of thing. All sense of self-mockery expunged. Even if, as May insists, it still came with a very definite wink of Freddie's mercurial eye.

MR ROBOT

How Queen turned to a superstar fantasy artist for the *News Of The World* cover image.

Words: **Henry Yates**

Think of a Queen album sleeve. Chances are that, if you're not picturing Mick Rock's shadowy floating heads on *Queen II*, then you've chosen the giant, impassive steel robot murdering the line-up on 1977's *News Of The World*. Aesthetically – not to mention musically – Queen's sixth album was quite a departure.

Their previous two album sleeves – 1975's *A Night At The Opera* and 1976's *A Day At The Races* – had been exercises in classic minimalism, little more than the Mercury-designed crest and a monochrome background. For *NOTW* the jump-off came when Roger Taylor dug out an old issue of the American comic *Astounding Science Fiction* from 1953. On its cover was the now-familiar robot, but here, in its original form, it proffered a dead man in its palm, its eyes cold and blank, seemingly unable to process the crime it has just committed).

Ever ambitious, the band didn't want to simply reproduce the image, so they tracked down its creator, US fantasy artist Frank Kelly Freas, to discuss an adaptation. In the niche world of science-fiction artwork, Freas was something of a superstar too. As the first artist to win 10 Hugo Awards (dubbed the 'Oscars of sci-fi art'), he had illustrated for genre heavyweights including Isaac Asimov and Robert Heinlein, while his most famous work was perhaps *MAD* magazine's mischievous cover star Alfred E Neuman. Freas agreed to customise his work for *News Of The World*: the robot would now clutch the bloodied Mercury and May, while Taylor and Deacon tumble to the ground like rag dolls. Open the sleeve and you found the steel monster reaching down into a dome to pluck out members of the terrified audience. It remains a ruthless, strangely troubling image, famously terrifying *Family Guy*'s Stewie in the 2012 episode *Killer Queen* (based on creator Seth MacFarlane's own fear of the album sleeve as a child).

Queen never had a mascot in the mould of Eddie, Rosie or Snaggletooth, but affection for *News Of The World*'s metallic colossus – now referred to by Brian May simply as 'Frank' – was palpable as it made a string of cameos on the band's 2017 world tour. On June 23, at Arizona's Gila River Arena, first-night punters watched as it battered through a wall of screens before *We Will Rock You*, appeared on Taylor's drum skin, cupped May during a solo spot and threatened to upstage Adam Lambert as he sang *Killer Queen* from atop its silver cranium. "Still plenty of work to do to explore this new production," May tweeted, "but don't tell me we're not theatrical!"

'Frank' and the entire stage design was brought to life by Stufish, who also based the stage shape on May's custom guitar.

And the closest you'll get to owning the *NOTW* robot for yourself? Either investigate the new *Queen Monopoly* game (where it's one of the counters) or track down one of the ultra-rare 54-inch plastic models that were created to promote the album back in 1977, and still occasionally surface on eBay.

STUFISH x2

Roger Taylor at home in Surrey, shot exclusively for *Classic Rock*.

"It's been a good life. I'm very lucky"

Words: **Paul Elliot** Portraits: **Kevin Nixon**

In 2013, **Roger Taylor** released his fifth solo album, *Fun On Earth*. The drummer sat down with *Classic Rock* to give one of his most wide-ranging and revealing interviews ever.

As befits a member of one of the most successful rock groups of all time, a man with a fortune estimated at £120 million, the home of Roger Taylor is grandiose. A white mansion, part of which dates back to the 13th century, situated in a picturesque village near Guildford in Surrey, the house is set amid acres of landscaped gardens, with views across miles of gently sloping fields and woodland.

Having lived here for 10 years, Taylor has added some personal touches to the place. At the front entrance, beneath a rather ostentatious portico, are two black statues of gorillas; in the garden, mounted on a metal frame, is a huge gong – a relic of past Queen tours.

More pragmatically, in one wing of the house there's a recording studio. And it is here that Taylor entertains *Classic Rock* on a hot summer afternoon. Seated beside his drum kit, dressed casually and sipping chilled French white wine, Taylor – Queen drummer and a lot more – has plenty to talk about.

He has a new solo album released in September, alongside a collection of his previous solo work. In October there's a tour by The Queen Extravaganza – billed as an 'official tribute show'. And later in the year there will be a live performance in Las Vegas for US TV by Queen with singer and former *American Idol* contestant Adam Lambert.

Forty years after the release of Queen's first album, and 21 years since the death of the band's legendary frontman Freddie Mercury, Taylor will discuss the past, present and future of Queen; the highs and lows of their extraordinary career; his relationship with Mercury; his long friendship with Queen guitarist Brian May; the 'lost' Queen songs that he and May are currently working on; and why, at the age of 64, he is still driven to make new music. "I'm a musician," he says. "It's what I do."

Let's cut straight to the chase, Roger – what is the status of Queen right now?
I'm still in that band, but there's only two of us left, Brian and myself. And only one of us can walk [laughs]. We still run the brand – that's what it is these days.

So if Queen is a brand, operated by you and Brian, where does Adam Lambert fit in?
I wouldn't say he's always going to be a part of Queen. We're doing the live TV show in Vegas with Adam and a couple of other guests, in a 10,000-seater, but that's all we've got planned. There are no rules, really. We do things very much on the spur.

But you plan to continue performing as Queen, with or without Adam Lambert?
Yeah, but it's only an occasional thing now. Last year, with Adam, we did three really big shows in Europe and three at Hammersmith Apollo, which was a lot of fun. Brian and I realised a long time ago: this is what we do, this is what we are. I'm afraid, readers, it goes on forever.

Are you happy with Adam as Queen's singer?
He works very well with us. He's an incredible singer. He's got a really magnetic stage presence. He's very sexy. And, of course, our more theatrical songs suit him perfectly. He's a diva – a male diva. And that's what he should think about being.

Before you began working with Adam, you toured and recorded an album as Queen + Paul Rodgers.
Paul is a singer that Freddie admired. He led two of rock's greatest bands: Free and Bad Company. In that sense he is the antithesis of Adam Lambert.

We actually loved playing the Free and Bad Company stuff with Paul. But, strangely enough, although Paul was wonderful, with that amazing blues-soul voice, Adam is more suited to some of our bigger songs than Paul was.

Red alert: Queen rock London's Rainbow Theatre in November 1974.

Some Queen fans think you're selling the band short by having a guy from *American Idol* as your singer. Do you understand that?
Whatever you do, people have to take it or leave it. That's always the case.

The same applies to The Queen Extravaganza, this new 'official tribute show'. What does that mean, exactly?
Good question. It means that we, or rather I, had a hand in making it. There's an awful lot of Queen tribute bands around, some good, some bad. So I thought, why don't we try to make a really good one, with brilliant musicianship? I put the band together in America, using the internet to audition. And the singer I found, Marc Martel, is an absolute dead ringer for Freddie's voice.

What's Marc Martel's background?
He's in his 30s, from Nashville, originally from Montreal. He's been in Christian bands. He's an extraordinary singer. We also found these amazing musicians. We had a nine-piece group at the beginning and it was too unwieldy. Too much like a showband, with three singers. Now it's a six-piece.

Three singers has the whiff of musical theatre.
And that's the last thing I'd ever want. I can't stand all that over-singing. What these guys do is play our music brilliantly. They can perform the whole of *Bohemian Rhapsody*, because they can all sing.

How good is the drummer, Tyler Warren?
Brilliant. And he can sing higher than I can. We all know that the drummer is the most important member of the band.

And in some cases the best looking?
Yeah, that as well [laughs].

Seriously, are *Classic Rock* readers going to like this tribute show?
I'm a rock and roller. I'm not a balladeer. And I think rock fans will love this band. They really get me going. Everybody who sees them will be impressed, I can pretty much guarantee it.

There were rumours in 2011 of a new Queen album, based on 'lost' demos of Freddie's.
Not true. We wouldn't want to put out an album of demos anyway.

Are there any remaining Queen songs, recorded with Freddie, which might be released in the future?
Yes, there's couple of tracks. Brian and I are going to work on them. One of them we all worked on, the other one was mainly a Brian song.

Were both songs written near the end of your time with Freddie?
Actually, no, they're quite old. I'm not bigging them up or anything, but yes, there are a couple of things that we're going to finish, and I dare say they will come out.

Are there any plans for another Queen album?
Universal want us to put together an album of the slower songs that people don't know so well, so I'm compiling that this week with Brian.

You also have a new solo album out soon.
It's been written over a five-year period, so it's very eclectic. Some gentle stuff, some rockier stuff, and some fairly political stuff.

Where did the political stuff come from?
I wrote a song called *The Unblinking Eye*, about disillusionment, the mess the country was in, shops on the high street closing and our politicians being such a despicable bunch.

Are you the kind of man who rants at the telly when the news is on?
I've grown out of that. The TV can't hear you.

What's the title of your new album?
My first solo effort [in 1981] was called *Fun In Space*. I was reading a lot of science fiction at the time. So I've called this one *Fun On Earth*. I've come down to earth a bit, but there's still a bit of fun in there – some smiley tracks.

Is it influenced by any modern music?
The best band I've seen in a long time is Sigur Ros. I love that atmospheric, semi-ambient thing they have. They're magnificent melodically. And their show is magnificent too. I saw them at the Academy in Brixton.

Do you still get out to gigs?
Very rarely. But I went to see that, even though I had flu at the time. Well, a nasty cold.

Also released in September is a collection of all the music you've made outside of Queen – including solo albums and your 80s side-project band The Cross.

Yes. It's called *The Lot*. I said: "Let's have the lot in there," so I thought let's call it that.

Is it all good stuff, or is there some rubbish in there too?
Like anything, there are some things you regret. But my last solo album, *Electric Fire* [1988], still sounds great.

What's the best song you wrote for Queen?
Hard to say. I like *Radio Ga Ga*. It was a nice fusion of synthesisers and… what can I call it… epic pop.

And the worst?
There's a few. I hate *Delilah* [on *Innuendo*]. That's just not me.

Was *Modern Times Rock 'N' Roll*, on the first Queen album, the first song you wrote for the band?
Yeah. Although before that we'd all written *Stone Cold Crazy* together. I think that was our first proper song.

As a drummer, you've cited John Bonham as your biggest influence.
For me there were three main influences: Bonzo, Keith Moon, and Mitch Mitchell, who I think was so underrated. I heard Ginger Baker saying some incredibly cruel things about Mitch Mitchell and I thought, what a cunt. Ginger Baker didn't have any of the subtlety or dexterity of Mitch Mitchell, whom he slagged the hell out of. That really got up my nose.

Who are your biggest influences as a songwriter?
Oh, Ginger Baker, definitely [laughs]. Seriously, it would be Dylan, Lennon… and Springsteen is fabulous.

Which song would you say has your best lyrics?
Heaven For Everyone [recorded first by The Cross and later by Queen] had some good stuff about love and dignity, the usual anti-war thing. *These Are The Days Of Our Lives* was quite nice in a reminiscing, rather old-fashioned kind of way.

And that song took on a greater meaning after Freddie's death.
It took on a resonance, yeah. I was sort of referencing us at the time I wrote it. We knew Freddie wasn't well.

Did you ever see a better frontman than Freddie?
You'll never see anyone connect as well with an audience as Freddie could.

But for all his showmanship on stage, wasn't he somewhat insecure in private?
Oh yeah. He was quite insecure about all sorts of things. Strangely, he was also shy in some ways. But he could switch it on and off. He was great when he was with his close circle, but if there were people he didn't know very well he could feel quite awkward.

"Ginger Baker said cruel things about Mitch Mitchell. What a ***t."

Was there any part of Freddie's personality that used to get on your tits?
Almost nothing. But he used to clear his throat in a quite nauseatingly loud way. But we got on famously.

In the 2011 documentary *Queen: Days Of Our Lives*, when you talk about the last year of Freddie's life and the hounding he received from the tabloid press, you sound furious, even after all the years.
I still feel it today. It was *The Sun*. It was like an assassination in order to flog a few newspapers. How vindictive and horrible. I thought that was a bit much. I felt very protective of Fred then. And just recently when the *News Of The World* went down I danced a fucking jig.

Did you ever court the tabloid press?
Not really. I never believed that tabloids sold records. Or actually furthered your career. And I think you're better off trying to keep out of them. I don't think they help you. If anything, they make you look like a tit. And there's too much ammunition there. The less they know, the better. Freddie got a lot of crap printed about him, Brian had a lot, and I had a little bit but not much.

Big shoes to fill: Brian May and "male diva" Adam Lambert.

GETTY X2/ISTOCK

Did you believe there was a homophobic subtext to some of the media coverage of Freddie's death?
Absolutely. "This is what you get…" It was just prurient, wasn't it?

Do you ever dream that Freddie is still around?
Yeah. Brian would tell you the same – that Freddie sort of lives with us. We spent so many years together, living in each other's pockets. And we'd socialise quite a lot together. So he's someone who's not going to go away. But I don't intend to spend the rest of my life living under the shadow of Freddie Mercury. He was my best mate and he's gone, bless him, and we miss him, but you've got to get on with life.

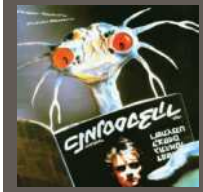
TAYLOR MADE

Five of Roger's best songs, recorded with or without Queen.

TENEMENT FUNSTER
Queen
Taylor pitches into the creative free-for-all that was Queen's *Sheer Heart Attack* with this ode to girls, guitars and teenage rebellion. Not just one of the best songs on the album, but also one of Queen's best.

I'M IN LOVE WITH MY CAR
Queen
An earthy riposte to the highfalutin operatics of *A Night At The Opera,* this petrolhead's anthem manages to rhyme *'forget her'* with *'carburettor'* and still sound cool. It appeared on the *Bohemian Rhapsody* single, making it one of the most successful B-sides in history.

DROWSE
Queen
Gloriously laid-back semi-ballad from 1976's *A Day At The Races*, in which an elderly Taylor looks back on the *'the brighter sun and easier lays'* of his youth through a fug of Panama Red smoke. Rose-tinted nostalgia at its best.



MY COUNTRY
Roger Taylor
Taylor went all new wave on his solo debut, 1981's synth-speckled *Fun In Space*, but he could still pull out anthemic rock'n'roll when he needed to, as this edited version of album highlight *My Country I & II* proves.

LIAR
The Cross
Taylor's rock-orientated side project The Cross were consistently mauled by the press, but they still hit the occasional home run. Not least this slow-burning track from the band's second album, *Mad, Bad And Dangerous To Know*, which shows off Taylor's gravel-throated voice at its most… well, gravelly.

Collecting their first silver disc, for *Queen II*, at the Cafe Royal in London on September 5, 1974.

GETTY/iSTOCK

The first Queen album is now 40 years old. What are your memories of making it?
It was all very exciting. Time in the studio seemed so expensive – 30 quid an hour, a huge amount of money back then. We would go in at four in the morning. It was hard work. And we never really got the sound that I wanted on the first album. We didn't have quite enough control, which we got on the second album.

In those early days, what were your hopes and dreams for Queen?
We wanted to get lots of work. We wanted to be recognised. We wanted to be rich and famous.

And how did that work out for you?
It worked out all right. But it's always a more gradual process than people imagine.

Looking back over Queen's career, what are you most proud of?
The way that the music has seeped into the general consciousness, the fact that we are still occasionally played on the radio, and a lot of the music is still popular. Kids know our music now, and I find that fantastic.

Any regrets?
Many regrets. Most are small ones. But I think we made a bad decision to go to South Africa [to play in Sun City in 1984, during the era of apartheid]. I think we were badly advised. Although we went there with the best intentions, I think it was the wrong decision.

But the following year Queen did the right thing and played at Live Aid. And stole the show with a performance that people still talk about today.
Live Aid was great day. I remember Bob Geldof describing it as a global jukebox. And we got that: right, we'll ram in as many songs as we can. If you're appearing on a global stage, you know that most people watching on television won't be your fans, so we thought the most sensible thing was to play the ones they know. Or rather, play the ones that they might know. So that's what we did.

How would you describe your relationship with Brian May?
We're best mates, really. It's amazing what Brian fits into his life. He's a genuine polymath. He's an astrophysics PhD, one of the world's foremost experts on stereophotography. He does all sorts of things. A bit bonkers, some of it.

You and Brian have continued as Queen without Freddie and without the band's other founding member, bassist John Deacon, who retired from the music business in the 90s. Can you understand why Robert Plant chose not to tour again with Led Zeppelin?
Yeah. Robert's a very pure-spirited man. Also, Zeppelin is very demanding on a singer – all those vocal gymnastics. Perhaps he thinks in some way he might not deliver at the level he was delivering at. And also there's the huge respect for Bonzo, who was the motherfucker of all rock drummers. So yeah, I can see why he won't do it. And Robert has a very respected career of his own.

> **"I don't intend to spend the rest of my life living under the shadow of Freddie Mercury."**

But if Freddie had lived and had declined to tour again with Queen, that would have been hard for you to accept.
I guess it would. But Freddie always felt his real comfort zone was when we were all together… bickering away [laughs].

Did that bickering come from having four songwriters in Queen?
Very much so. There were definitely four schools of writing going on. John and I found our strengths later than the other two. Right from the start, Freddie just went on in leaps and bounds. He just sort of invented himself. But, at the end of the day, we understood each other. And it worked very well.

In the glory days of Queen you had a reputation as a playboy. Were you?
No. I think that's overplayed. We had a good time – we had a *really* good time – but we didn't shout about it.

Have you slowed down over the years?
Of course. Everybody slows down. Or dies. And I don't intend dying yet.

What's next for Roger Taylor? A solo tour for your new album?
I'm thinking about getting together some mates in a really hot band and getting out on the road. And if I did, I'd have my son Rufus Tiger Taylor playing drums. He plays with Queen when we tour. He plays percussion most of the time, and when I do anything out front he plays drums. He's Brian's favourite drummer, I think.

Did you teach him too well?
Actually, he's more from the Taylor Hawkins school than mine.

Have you ever thought about stopping playing drums?
I can't imagine it. It would be horrible to think I'd never play the drums or sing again. It's like a painter, really – most painters keep painting.

But it's a bit easier to paint than to play drums.
Very true. But my style gets more economical and relaxed, without me realising it. It's not quite as wild as it was. But I still love to play. I've done a couple of shows with Jeff Beck recently, which is a delight. Jeff is just the most wonderful guitar player.

So you're not thinking of retiring?
Why would I want to stop? It's not like I have to get up at seven o'clock in the morning to go and play the drums, it's something I can pick up and put down when I choose.

All those years ago you wanted to be rich and famous. And your dreams came true. Is there a downside to all of this?
Not really. I slide around fairly unrecognised, which suits me down to the ground. Some people enjoy making an entrance and being noticed. That's not really me.

It's been a good life, hasn't it?
It has. I'm very lucky.

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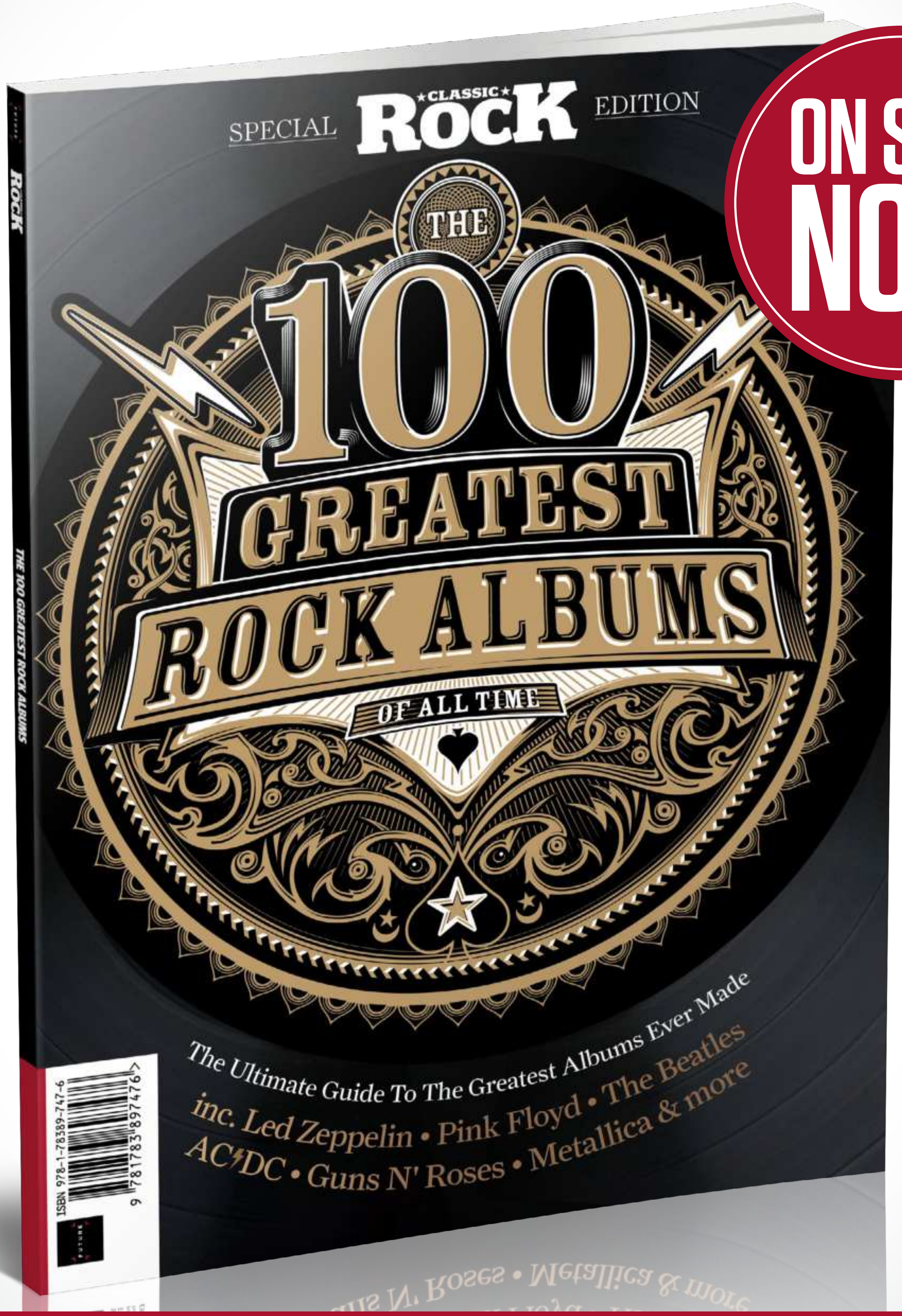

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All That Jazz

When **Queen** released their *Jazz* album, they wanted to throw a party that no one would forget. Cue a night of rock'n'roll excess in downtown New Orleans that would go down in legend...

Words: **Johnny Black**

As debauched parties go, this one had it all. And then some. It was October 31, 1978 and Queen were launching their *Jazz* album in New Orleans with a bash whose guest list included 80 reporters flown in from around the globe, and 52 EMI company MDs. The champagne flowed like water, couples coupled under the tables, and the entertainment included meat-covered dwarves, transsexual strippers and a woman who smoked cigarettes via an unlikely orifice…

Freddie Mercury: We just wanted to have a bit of fun. The title suggested one or two promotional possibilities… New Orleans was the obvious place for a party to launch it.

Bob Hart (Head of Corporate PR, EMI): Queen were one of those acts that Capitol Records, as they had previously done with The Beatles, decided had no chance in the United States, and passed on.

Bob Gibson (partner, Gibson And Stromberg PR): So Queen were on Elektra Records in the US and EMI for the rest of the world. Contracts were coming up, it was time for renegotiation, so the party was really sort of a precursor to negotiations.

Bob Hart: The MD of EMI at the time, Leslie Hill, called me in and said: "We're going to stage a party for Queen in New Orleans and I want every MD of an EMI company in the world to attend."

Bob Gibson: Queen's American agent called me and asked if I'd be interested in doing something. Our company was called Gibson And Stromberg, but we were given the nickname Guzzle And Snort and it kinda stuck. I was Guzzle for my alcoholic intake and my partner, Gary Stromberg, was Snort. We had a meeting at The Polo Lounge in Beverley Hills with Queen's manager Jim Beach, where they told me it would be in New Orleans, and it would be Halloween, so what did I think and how much would it cost? I was very cocky when I was young and I remember saying: "I have no idea how much it's gonna cost, and I don't wanna hear the word 'budget'. It's gonna be successful and you know what I'm capable of doing." After two or three trips to New Orleans with my staff, we decided that the only suitable facility was the Fairmont Hotel, which had a giant ballroom. We wanted to create an environment where whatever you wanted to do was sanctioned, and we decided to play up the Halloween aspect of it. The room was very stark and bare, very high ceilings, so the first thing we did was to rent 50 dead trees.

"There was a naked fat lady who smoked cigarettes in her crotch."
James Henke (journalist)

Bob Hart: The Fairmont was a clean, modern-looking hotel, but with the trees it ended up looking like a skeletal forest. It had a kind of witchcraft theme.

Tony Brainsby (Queen's publicist): Masses of hanging, creepy vines, dry-ice smoke, snakes…

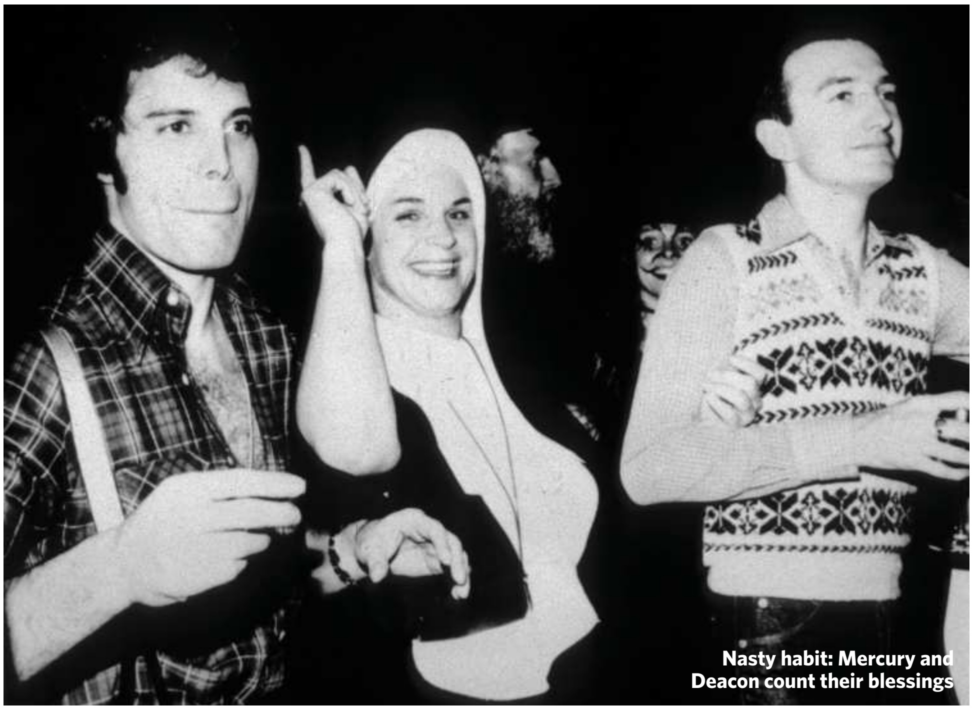
Bob Gibson: Queen wanted a lot of street people. Remember, there's a lot of underground sexual perversion in New Orleans, which seemed to please Freddie. We held auditions over a period of three or four days, and hired a total of 60 or 70 entertainers. All kinds of people turned up, but we had to draw the line at the guy whose act was that he bit the heads off live chickens. Several of the bars on Bourbon Street had to close on the night of the party because we took all of their entertainers.

Sylvie Simmons (US correspondent, *Sounds*): I was installed in this very grand room at The Fairmont, where the first thing I saw was a bottle of champagne in a big steel bucket, topped off with a gorgeous, plumed and sequinned eye-mask to wear to the party. I remember walking into the ballroom where there must have been 400 or 500 people. The tables were laden with pyramids of food – shrimp, oysters, lobsters, all kind of meats – like a bizarre medieval fantasy banquet for a king. Unfortunately, being vegetarian I couldn't eat any of it. So my calorie intake had to be liquid.

Mark Mehler (journalist, *Circus*): Shortly before midnight the Olympia Brass Band came marching through the hall, accompanied by Queen.

Sylvie Simmons: There were strippers and exotic dancers of all denominations, gorgeous women, handsome men. Something to suit every taste. There were grossly huge black ladies, 300lb specials in tiny thongs, and dwarves…

James Henke (journalist, *Rolling Stone*): …And a naked fat lady who smoked cigarettes in her crotch.



Nasty habit: Mercury and Deacon count their blessings

ALL IMAGES: JOHN RODGERS/GETTY

Top rump: Freddie Mercury and friend.

JOHN RODGERS/GETTY

"There's a lot of sexual perversion in New Orleans, which pleased Freddie..."

Sylvie Simmons: It was a bit like being in a weird Fellini movie. There was endless champagne being poured, and a display of naked flesh that went on well into the next morning.

Joe Smith (Chairman, Elektra Records): It was definitely a Freddie party. He was testing the limits of what he could get away with. And people were kind of dazed, because there had never been anything quite like it.

Freddie Mercury : We wanted the atmosphere to fit in with the rather naughty reputation of the French Quarter.

Brian May: It was deliberately excessive. Partly for our own enjoyment, partly for friends to enjoy, partly because it's exciting for record company people – and partly for the hell of it.

Bob Gibson: The Japanese and South American label representatives were astonished by all these naked women, or men, or whatever. So Jim Beach and I got every dollar bill in the hotel and went back into the ballroom with armloads of money, which we distributed so the people could do the traditional thing of putting money in the G-string.

Peter Hince (head of crew, Queen): Being the crew, we had to finish up the load-out after the gig, so we didn't get to the party until it was well under way. It was hard to see what was going on, there was just this mêlée, and you'd be wading through the crowd and suddenly come across women tangled up with snakes, or jugglers, transsexuals, all kinds of extreme acts. Everything was going off at the same time. Fred was signing naked girls' bums.

Bob Hart: There were lots of dwarves strolling around but not, as legend has it, with trays of cocaine on their heads. That wouldn't have gone down well with all of those EMI executives.

Peter Hince: I have no doubt there were narcotics at the party, but trays of cocaine, that was complete bollocks. The crew would have cleaned them out in 10 seconds.

Roger Taylor: It never happened. Well, I never saw it… Actually, it could have been true.

Peter Hince: Among the piles and piles of food on the tables, there was this huge mound of meat. But when you went to take a slice off, a midget would burst out from underneath it all. Then he'd go back inside and wait for the next person. I remember a few of us from the crew sitting around with all these girls going past, then this blonde comes and sits on my lap, and I thought: "Phew! All right! Here we go, rock'n'roll." And she was getting quite affectionate, sticking her tongue in my ear, when one of our guys came up and said: "It's a bloke! It's a geezer, I tell you." They were very convincing.

Bob Hart: A lot of what went on has become exaggerated over the years. I've heard it said that hookers were flown in. That did not happen. I mean, flying hookers into New Orleans? Gimme a break. If anyone wanted a blowjob they could just stroll down the street.

Peter Hince: There were definitely people at it under the tables. All kinds of goings-on.

Bob Hart: I think it was Brian who said to me that he thought it was all a bit too contrived. That was an interesting comment, coming from a member of Queen. It was like it was a mild disappointment to the band. I don't know quite what they expected – human sacrifice or what – but they felt it was contrived decadence, not real decadence. That was Freddie's complaint. He said: "This is pretend."

Peter Hince: We wheeled out all these crates of booze and started partying on the bus. Some of these 'girls', shall we say, decided they wanted to come on the bus with us, but we couldn't tell what sex they were. Next thing you know, one of my guys is down on his hands and knees, sticking his head up one of their skirts. Then he comes out and says: "This one's definitely a girl, but look at this!" He'd found a backstage pass in her knickers!

Sylvie Simmons: Not long before dawn, Tony Brainsby, Freddie Mercury and I went for a walk down Bourbon Street. Freddie was in a great mood. I was pointing out what I considered to be cute boys, and Freddie was saying: "No, they're gay." Then he waved at them and it turned out, sure enough, they were gay. I don't remember him getting off with any of them though.

Bob Gibson: Overall, it was a smashing success. We had a couple of photographer friends who shot great pictures that went around the world, and the journalists wrote accounts that made it sound even better than I remember it.

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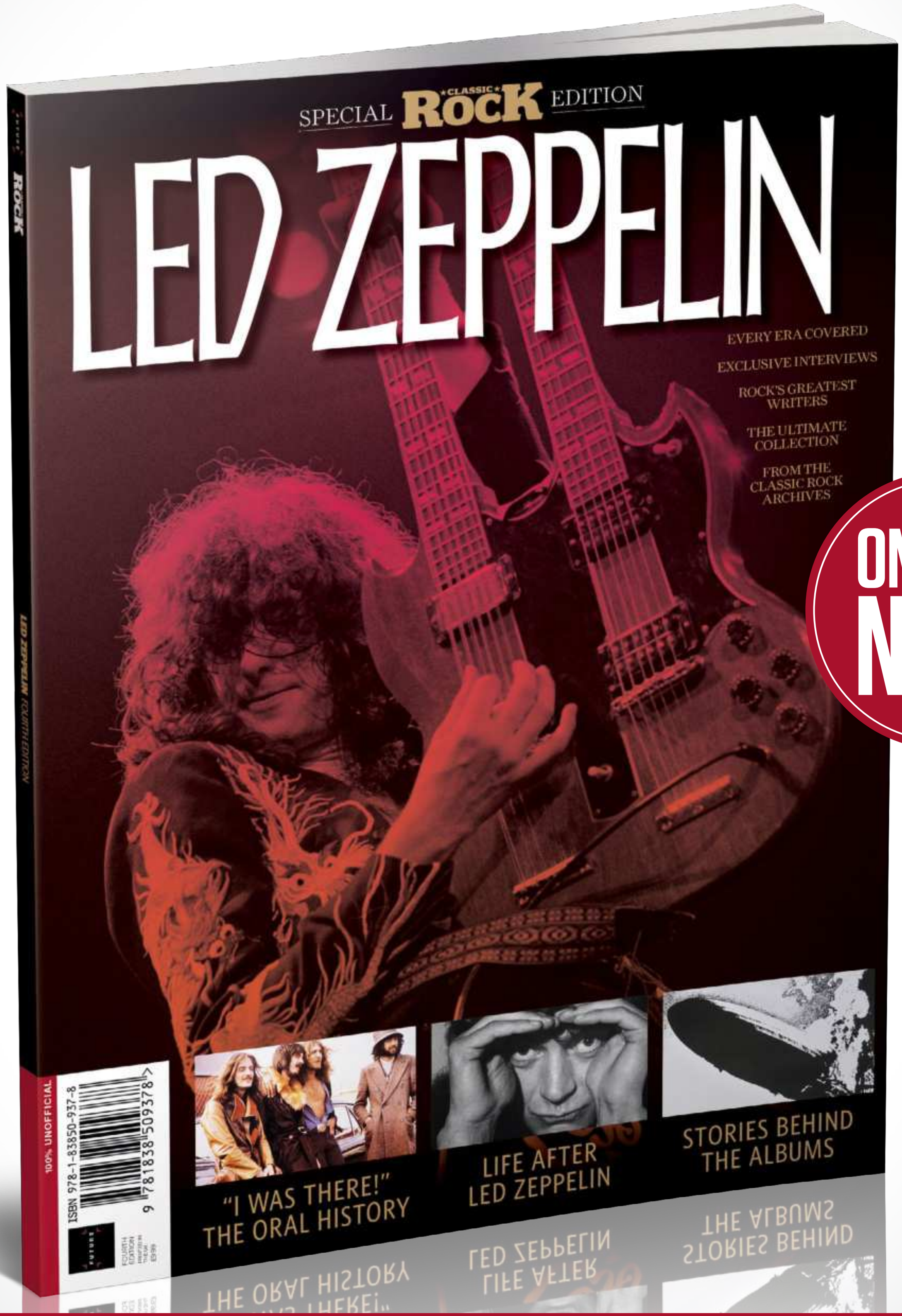

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"Freddie's ego was not as big as people think. It was all a persona"

Longtime Queen roadie **Peter Hince** had ringside seat to the band's stellar rise. He shares his memories of the men and the music that made the band so great

Words: **Paul Elliott**

Peter Hince worked for Queen for 12 years as roadie for the band's singer Freddie Mercury and for bassist John Deacon. When former Mott The Hoople roadie Hince started out with the band in 1975, they were recording the soon-to-be classic album *A Night At The Opera*. He bowed out after their huge gig at Knebworth on August 9, 1986 – a show that would sadly turn out to be Queen's final performance with Mercury.

Hince looked back over his career with the band in his book *Queen Unseen*. It offered a revealing insight into the life of the frontman and the years in which Queen became one of the biggest bands in the world.

Here, Hince tells us about Mercury: the man behind the myth. He spills the beans about the other members of Queen – Deacon, guitarist Brian May and drummer Roger Taylor. And he reveals the truth about that legendary Queen party…

You knew Freddie Mercury well. What was he really like as a person?

"People talk about Freddie and his ego, but his ego was not as big as people think. It was all a persona. He could make fun of himself, whereas some of the other guys in the band couldn't do it in the same way. You could have a laugh with Freddie, but you knew were the line was. He wasn't necessarily the prima donna that everybody thought he was."

Was Freddie the greatest rock star of his generation?

"As a frontman he was unbeatable. It wasn't just about his voice but the way he commanded the stage. I loved Zeppelin and The Who – Plant and Daltrey were great frontmen – but I think Fred had more in terms of showmanship and presence. For him it was all about interacting with the audience, knowing how to play an audience and get them on his side. And he gave everything in every show."

> **"There was something special about Fred, from the very early days."**
>
> Peter Hince

Did he have a certain presence off stage as well as on?

"Oh yeah. Fred was unique. I used to work for Bowie, but no one had the aura that Fred had. Maybe Mick Jagger did, to a degree. But with Fred there was always something about him, from the very early days. He had that kind of aura. Not aloofness. But you felt that he was someone special."

For all the charisma that Freddie had, did you sense that beneath it all he was insecure?

"Oh, totally. Always. He did have a lot of insecurities – not professionally, but personally."

When did you first meet Freddie and the other guys in Queen?

"1973. I was working for Mott The Hoople and Queen were supporting them on a British tour. Queen's first album had just come out."

And you worked for Bowie before then?

"Yeah. I was Mick Ronson's roadie on the Ziggy Stardust tour. After the Hammersmith show and David 'retired', I worked for Mott. And by the time Mott had finished in '75, I needed work and luckily I got the job with Queen."

And you witnessed first-hand their rise to global superstardom…

"Queen wanted to be the biggest band in the world. They made no secret of that. And yes, I saw it all happen. In the 70s they were a fantastic rock band, and in the 80s they became a fantastic pop band."

You were also witness to the recording of many classic Queen albums.

"I was there when Bohemian Rhapsody was recorded. I just remember not knowing what the bloody hell it was all about! And I was with Freddie when he wrote Crazy Little Thing Called Love. That was a really special moment."

Mercury and May: "Brian is a complex person."

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They are the champions: Queen onstage in 1977.

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There is one major disappointment in your book. You refer to an infamous story about the party staged in New Orleans in 1978 for the release of Queen's album *Jazz* – at which, it was alleged, guests were served cocaine from bowls carried by dwarves on their heads. You call the story "complete bollocks"…
"It is – complete nonsense. There were dwarves there, but they were hidden under plates of liver and other cold meats."

John Deacon was always the quiet man of Queen. In a sense, he is the great enigma of the band…
"John is virtually a recluse now. He wants to remain private and I think people should respect that. John was always a very down to earth, regular guy. He had six kids and was really into his family, but he also just happened to be in one of the biggest bands in the world."

How would you describe Brian May?
"Brian is one of the most complex people you could ever come across. He's got a huge heart and wants to be nice and kind to everybody. He was the most sensitive of the band in some ways. But like most people he's got another side. He can be quite ruthless."

And Roger Taylor? He certainly seemed to relish being in Queen
"Roger loved the rock star lifestyle – all the cars and the country houses. He certainly enjoyed his money, as Fred did, whereas Brian and John, being more traditional family men, they held back a little bit. But Rog loved it. At times he could be a little bit rock-starry, but I think he's mellowed in the last few years. He's more reflective."

> **"Roger loved the rock star lifestyle – all the cars and country houses."**
>
> Peter Hince

Freddie was always a gay man hidden in plain sight. Was that difficult for him during the less enlightened times of the 70s and 80s?
"Very much so. Obviously after *The Game* in 1980, with him becoming more overtly gay with the moustache, I think things became a little difficult for him then."

Live Aid, in 1985, was a defining moment in Queen's career. What do you remember most of that day?
"Well, at first they weren't keen to do it. There were serious problems within the band at that time. I think it's quite likely they would have broken up because (1984 album) *The Works* hadn't done anything in America, they didn't tour it there. And Fred was doing his solo stuff. So Live Aid galvanised them. It was a watershed for the band. They got the audience at the right time with the right songs. Maybe they felt they had something to prove. When they came off, you really felt – and they felt – that they'd stolen the show. Elton said that to them afterwards: "You fuckers!"

In all the many years that you worked for the band, what were the best and worst parts of the job?
"The best part was the travel, the experiences, and that kind of reflected glory from working for a huge band. The worst parts were when you're not appreciated, you're feeling used and abused, when it's a horrible, dirty, mucky existence – loading trucks, not sleeping for two days. But that was all part of the job. And the bottom line was it was a job."

When you finally quit, in 1986, it was a huge change for you. Did you have sleepless nights about that decision?
"Not really. One day something just clicks. It got to the point where I was working my bollocks off, I didn't feel I was being appreciated, and there was no way to further yourself within the organisation. I didn't want to work for another band. I thought I'd go out at the top of my game. I also felt I probably couldn't have gone on much longer. It does get to you. I don't regret it."

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King of Queen: Freddie ruling Wembley Stadium in 1986.

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By Royal Appointment

It was the decade when **Queen** had it all, lost it, and clawed it back again. But behind the strut and sparkle of the '80s, there were stormclouds gathering…

Words: **Henry Yates**

For the rock galacticos of the '70s, the transition into a new decade proved a difficult gearshift. By the end of 1980, Led Zeppelin had been sunk by the death of talismanic drummer John Bonham. Unravelling alongside them were The Who, and while the Stones and Pink Floyd continued to play to packed stadia, the crowds increasingly called out for the old songs.

In this age of stumbling giants, Queen hit the '80s like a train. Already, the band had kissed off the '70s with their biggest US hit to date, in the form of rockabilly pastiche *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*. Dreamt up by Mercury in a Munich bathtub and captured by incoming producer Reinhold Mack at that city's Musicland Studios, the single seemed the launchpad to an imperious decade – even if Brian May told *Guitar World* that the lineup operated less through design as dumb luck: "Everyone thought we had this huge monster plan, the Queen Machine, but it's an illusion."

Happy accident or otherwise, by February 1980, the band were keen to capitalise, returning to the same Bavarian studio for a four-month hot-streak, where the four members' prolific output was underlined by the 40-odd songs pitched for inclusion on that year's *The Game*. "For me, the band was functioning well at this point," noted Roger Taylor in Mark Blake's definitive biography of the band, *Is This The Real Life?* "*The Game* was much more of a piece than *Jazz*. Our songwriting was much better." ▷

May would recall putting in long shifts at the Musicland console "at three o'clock, trying to make something work". But the lineup played hard too, albeit separately, with Mercury holding court at the Old Mrs Henderson gay club while the other band members repaired to Sugar Shack: a local disco that would prove hugely influential on their evolving sound.

"We would take tracks down there after hours and play them over their system to see how they worked," reflected May. "Anything with a bit of groove sounded good. We became obsessed with leaving space in our music and making songs that would sound great in the Sugar Shack."

The venue's vibe would spill into the guitarist's own *Dragon Attack*: a funky jam reportedly fuelled by vodka and tonics. But more significant was its thumbprint on Queen's biggest hit of the decade: *Another One Bites The Dust*.

While tipping a hat to the Munich club scene, John Deacon's three-note bassline was also the product of both his Motown-fixated youth and a chance overhearing of an early version of US funk icons Chic's 1979 *Risqué* while hanging out with that band's bassist Bernard Edwards in New York ("What isn't cool," the American later told *NME*, "is that the press started saying we had ripped them off").

And while the rest of the band were bemused – May recalling that "[we] had no idea what Deakey was doing" and that Taylor's initial response was "unprintable" – they soon fell into the groove. Taylor's drums were deliciously dry and clipped. May's funk riffs scritch-scratched between the warm bassline. Mercury was "so into what we were doing," recalled the guitarist, "that he sang until his throat bled."

It was a rare moment of synergy in an often bad-tempered session. Wary of Mack since being asked to relinquish his Red Special and play a Fender Telecaster on *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, May now niggled with his producer over the approach to tracking guitars. On the brink of his debut solo album, *Fun In Space*, Taylor seemed particularly restless, pitching up to sessions with an Oberheim OB-X – past Queen albums had pointedly claimed 'No Synthesisers' – and pushing to sing the lead on *Rock It* (the song ultimately saw the drummer and Mercury share vocal duties). "Keeping the focus," Mack told *iZotope*, "was difficult at the best of times with this mixture of personalities."

"There were huge rows in the studio," noted Taylor. "Usually over how long Brian was taking, or whether he was having an omelette. We drove each other nuts."

"We all walked out at various times," May recalled. "You get hard times, as in any relationship. We definitely did. Usually in the studio; never on tour. On tour, you always have a clear, common aim. But in the studio you're all pulling in different directions and it can be very frustrating. You only get twenty-five per cent of your own way at the best of times. So, yes, we did have hard times. Feeling that you're not being represented, that you're not being heard. Because that's one of the things about being a musician, you want to be heard. You want your ideas to be out there. You want to be able to explore what's coming to you in the way of inspiration. It was a difficult compromise to find, but always worth finding once you did find it."

Mercury was more succinct on the dynamic: "Four cocks fighting – lovely!"

"There were huge rows in the studio. Usually over how long Brian was taking. We drove each other nuts."

Roger Taylor

But for now, the numbers papered over the cracks. Released in June 1980, *The Game* stormed to No.1 on both sides of the Atlantic, the sense of a reinvigorated band completed by a leather-jacketed sleeve shot that retooled these '70s peacocks for the new era. Forty-six US dates climaxed with Mercury firing champagne over the crowd during a three-night residency at New York's Madison Square Garden; in the UK, the band christened the newly opened Birmingham NEC. By comparison, it was inevitable that the same year's *Flash Gordon* soundtrack seemed a little slight.

"We wanted to write the first rock 'n' roll musical," Taylor told Blake of the latter. "It was a very camp film, but I thought our music suited the film in all its camp awfulness."

While *Another One Bites The Dust* reached No.1 in the US, becoming Queen's definitive Stateside hit, the lineup hadn't failed to notice their rocketing numbers in South America, where the single's chart-topping performance in both Argentina and Guatemala gave Queen a claim to be that continent's biggest rock band. In 1981, the band transplanted their live rig for shows on an unprecedented scale, shifting some 100 tons of equipment, even travelling with artificial turf to protect the hallowed stadium pitches at feverish shows in Buenos Aires, Mar Del Plata, Rosario and São Paulo.

Blowing through the continent on a trek that played to a record paying crowd of 231,000 in São Paulo, and grossed $3.5 million in total, the hysteria required an armed convoy – and for each band member to be issued a bodyguard drafted from the seamier end of Brazil's military. "They were the heavy, heavy police," noted a momentarily serious Mercury, "who actually kill people at the drop of a hat."

If Deacon's *Another One Bites The Dust* bassline was the soundtrack of 1980, it would be challenged the next year by another low-end groove, as Mercury and David Bowie tested each other's talents – and patience – on *Under Pressure*. Wine and cocaine flowed in a 24-hour session at Montreux's Mountain Studios, but if the resulting single sounded magnanimous – with both singers trading lead vocals, many of them improvised – May remembers otherwise.

"It was very hard," he said in 2008, "because you already had four precocious boys and David,

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Queen circa *The Game*: "Four cocks fighting."

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who was precocious enough for all of us. Passions ran very high. I found it very hard because I got so little of my own way. But David had a real vision and he took over the song lyrically."

When even a rough monitor mix of *Under Pressure* strolled to No.1 in the UK, it seemed typical of a band who now appeared to snatch victory at every turn. But that impression was about to be rudely shattered by the song's parent album. *Hot Space* was the stumble that broke the band's imperious run, the disjointed product of a lineup fractured by excess and the divide-and-rule tactics of Mercury's personal manager, Paul Prenter ("He led Freddie by the nose," one band associate told Blake). "We had got fairly decadent by then," admitted Taylor. "We started work at all sorts of odd hours. The days drifted into the nights in this endless cycle."

You could hear the division on *Hot Space*. Mining the same spare dance groove as *Another One Bites The Dust*, this time around, the results were anaemic and light on the anthemics required to fill Queen's stadiums. May and Deacon butted heads over guitar tones on *Back Chat*. Mercury shot down May's requests for more volume ("What the fucking hell do you want, a herd of wildebeest charging from one side to the other?"). Meanwhile, the married-with-children lineup had grown weary of the singer celebrating his promiscuity in song.

"I can remember having a go at Freddie because some of the stuff he was writing was very definitely on the gay side," said May. "I remember saying it would be nice if this stuff could be universally applicable, because we have friends of every persuasion."

> **"Keeping the focus was difficult at the best of times with this mixture of personalities."**
>
> **Producer Mack**

Released in May 1982 – and preceded by *Body Language*, a chilly synth-funk single that virtually erased May's role in the band – Taylor even decried the sleeve of *Hot Space* ("Absolute shit"). That consensus was echoed across the planet. Crowds in Germany responded to cuts like *Staying Power* with cat-calls ("If you don't want to listen to it," snapped Mercury, "fucking go home!"). The album limped to a humbling No.22 in the US, and a fractious tour of the States ended at the LA Forum – the last date the original Queen lineup would ever play in America. May told it straight: "We hated each other for a while."

In 1983, a trial separation saw the bandmembers dive into solo work, with May drafting Eddie Van Halen for the admired but under-selling *Star Fleet Project*, while Mercury held an abortive session with Michael Jackson and chipped away at 1985's *Mr Bad Guy*. But the band that May dubbed 'the mothership' – for all its attendant headaches – still exerted a powerful pull. By year's end, the lineup were ensconced at LA's Record Plant, where Taylor – wounded at being told his offerings weren't up to snuff – served up *Radio Ga Ga*: a yearning, pulsing electro-ballad created on synths and drum machines, complete with a lyric about "how important radio used to be" and a handclap hook that would rival *We Will Rock You* for its live Pavlovian response.

"I think Roger was thinking about it as just another track," noted Mercury, who was invited by the drummer to finish the song. "But I instantly felt there was something in there, a really good, strong, saleable commodity."

Taylor's intention to give fans "the works" gifted

GETTY x2

Freddie onstage during the tour for their most divisive album, *Hot Space*.

the album its title and was a fair summary of material that ran the gamut. May returned to basics with *Hammer To Fall*: a crunching rocker that could have fallen off a Queen album from the '70s. Mercury supplied the reflective lilt of *It's A Hard Life* (a song tainted by a dressing-up box video that the band despised). Meanwhile, Deacon again lived up to his billing as the band's secret weapon with *I Want To Break Free*, whose wistful escapism would give the band both another signature tune and No.3 single in the UK.

Unlike *Hot Space* – which had dragged frustrated fans too far into leftfield – *The Works* felt like a band still questing, while acknowledging their classic sound. "I see it as being a lot closer to the middle period than the last three or four albums," May told *Guitar World* at the time. "A lot closer to *A Night At The Opera* and *News Of The World* and a little bit like *The Game*. But some of the writing is the next step beyond, it's not going back in time. Because we've integrated some of the modern technologies. But we haven't gone totally towards machine music because the fact is we don't like it."

On home turf, the upturn was palpable, with *The Works* hitting No.2 in the UK and clinging to the domestic chart for 93 weeks. But the impression that America had turned away was cemented by *I Want To Break Free*'s infamous video, featuring the band dragged up as servile housewives, with Mercury pushing a vacuum cleaner in a padded bra and black leather miniskirt. Middle America didn't get the joke, and the band – in their first incarnation, at least – never recovered there.

"I know it was received with horror in the greater part of America," May told writer Mick Wall. "To them it was boys dressing up as girls and it was unthinkable, especially for a rock band. I was actually in some of those TV stations when they got the thing and a lot of them refused to play it. They were visibly embarrassed about having to deal with it."

No longer a band prepared to slum it, Queen decided that trawling a cooling America was no priority. "And we were not seen for quite a long time in the States," May noted. "Freddie didn't want to go back smaller than we'd been before. He was like: 'Let's just wait, and then soon we'll go out and we'll do stadiums in America as well.' Only of course we never did."

The international circuit was clamouring, but the band's broadening horizons would lead to the era's most serious misstep. Developed by hotel mogul Sol Kerzner and opened in 1979 in the North West Province of South Africa, the Sun City resort was a paradise of twinkling pools and lush gardens – tainted by its uncomfortable tag as the 'apartheid Las Vegas'. With the country still gripped by segregation, the United Nations' cultural boycott demanded that musicians resist the lure of playing there – even in the face of Kerzner's generous fees. Queen weren't the first marquee name to break the red line – Rod Stewart and Elton John had both appeared at Sun City in 1983 – but their residency in October 1984 sparked the fiercest opprobrium.

The band fought their corner, pointing out that they had insisted on playing to an integrated audience and staying in a mixed hotel.

"Those criticisms are absolutely and definitely not justified," argued Brian May in a fractious *Smash Hits* interview. "We're totally against apartheid and all it stands for, but I feel that by going there, we did a lot of bridge building. We actually met musicians of both colours. They all welcomed us with open arms. The only criticism we got was from outside South Africa." ▷

Have fork, will travel: Mercury on the Bullet Train during a Japanese tour.

It cut no ice. In the UK, the Musicians' Union issued a hefty fine, while the band found themselves on the UN's cultural blacklist. The poison from the incident dripped into publications like *NME*, where socially conscious artists like Paul Weller wagged their fingers. By 1985, as Steven Van Zandt's Artists United Against Apartheid released the protest song *Sun City* – key lyric: *"I ain't gonna play Sun City!"* – Queen seemed like pariahs on the wrong side of history.

Commercially, all was not lost. In January 1985, Queen played to 300,000 fans at Rock In Rio, a performance only marred by Mercury's pelting with rocks and cans during a drag routine for *I Want To Break Free* (he calmed the crowd by singing *We Will Rock* You in a double-sided flag, with the Union Jack flipped to reveal the Bandeira Do Brasil). Even then, the sense lingered that for Queen to be embraced again on home soil, it would take a redemption on an almost impossibly epic scale. The kind of redemption that only Live Aid could offer.

May would recall in *Smash Hits* that the band almost snubbed Bob Geldof's invitation to play the biggest charity gig ever staged: "Our first reaction was 'Oh God! Not another one. We'd been involved in quite a few and we were a bit disillusioned as to how the whole business works."

"They were the heavy, heavy police who would kill people at the drop of a hat."
Freddie Mercury

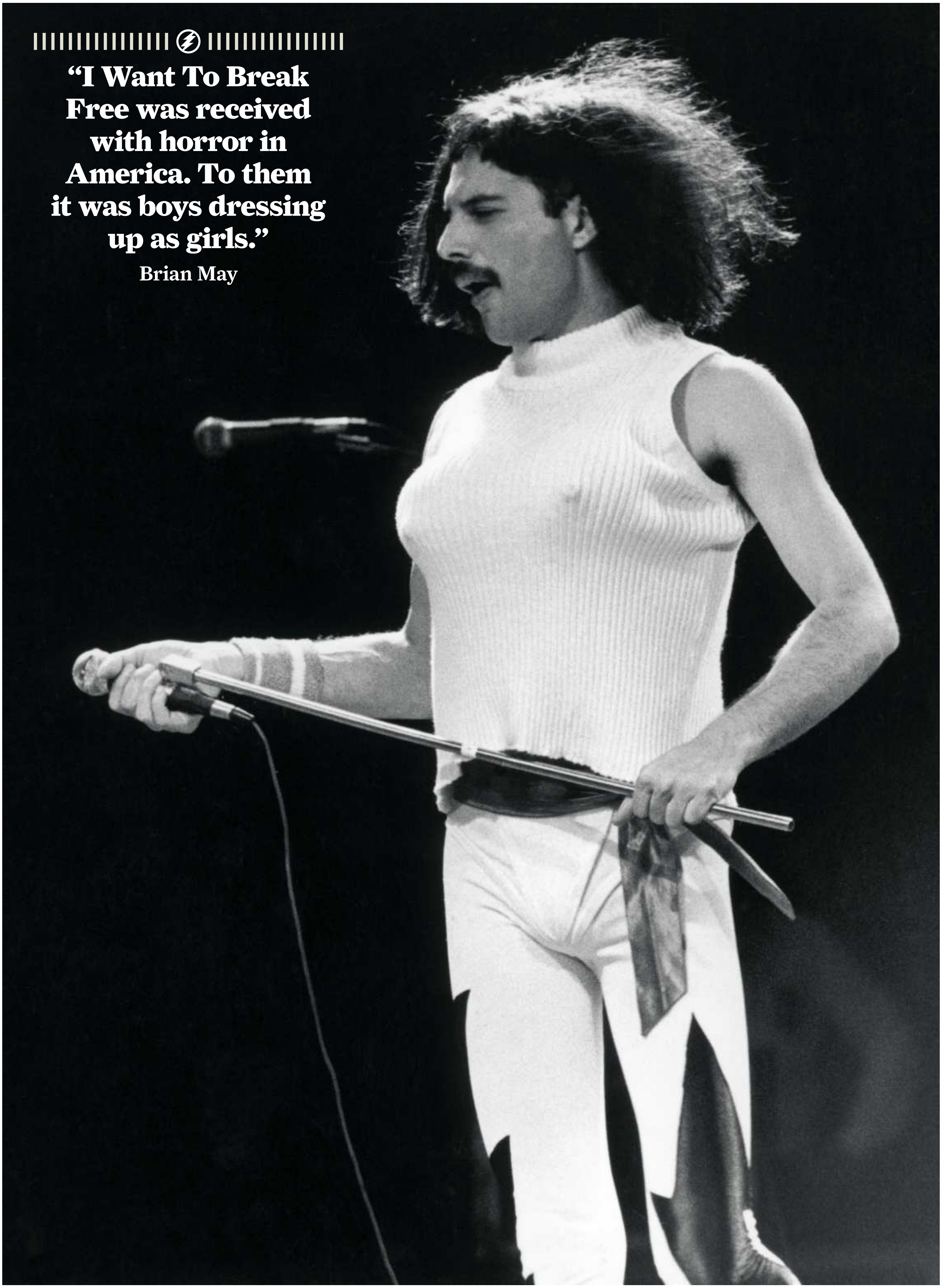
But on that day in July, Queen's six-song set was a resurrection, launching them into the *One Vision* single, 1986's *A Kind Of Magic* album and the restorative Magic Tour, its 26-date arena itinerary speaking of a band emphatically back in business.

Playing to over 400,000 fans and grossing more than £11 million, dates at Maine Road, St James' Park and Slane Castle were topped by two storied shows at Wembley Stadium, where a 64-foot stage and twin ego ramps lived up to Taylor's promise that "it will make Ben Hur look like The Muppets".

And if the lineup's previous hands-across-the-water gesture in South Africa had fallen flat, there were no such ethical issues with their arrival at Budapest's Népstadion, where 80,000 fans were let off the leash by the ruling Communist party's authoritarian prime minister, György Lázár (who allowed clapping for the night, if not drinking and smoking). By the time Mercury had serenaded the stadium with local folk standard *Tavaszi Szél Vizet Áraszt* – the lyrics scrawled on his palm – the reaction, as May told it, "was fucking deafening".

And yet, amidst these myriad triumphs, an aside from Mercury in Budapest was darkly prophetic, the singer responding to a reporter's enquiry as to whether he planned to return to Eastern Europe, Officially, Mercury would not learn of his HIV diagnosis until Spring 1987. But with the tabloid press speculating about an earlier AIDS test in Harley Street, confidant Barbara Valentin claiming he had already shown symptoms and ex-lover Tony Bastin shortly to die of the disease, perhaps the singer sensed the gathering stormclouds. Mercury would return to Budapest, he replied that day, "if I'm still alive".

The show went on – and the finale could only be Knebworth Park. On August 9th, 1986, a sea of 120,000 fans awaited the helicopter touchdown of a band who could go no higher. Every corner of the catalogue was mined for gold; every thrust and jab of Mercury's microphone caught on the site's giant TV screens. *The Miracle* album of 1989 still lay ahead of them, but this was the truest swansong to the band's larger-than-life decade. And at the end of the night, the frontman's heartfelt last words from the stage – from any stage – had a sense of finality befitting what would be the last show by the classic Queen lineup. "Goodnight and sweet dreams…"



"I Want To Break Free was received with horror in America. To them it was boys dressing up as girls."

Brian May

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Freddie Mercury on the Live Aid stage: "I'm doing it out of pride – pride that I've been asked."

"It was the perfect stage for Freddie"

How Live Aid didn't just resurrect **Queen**'s ailing career but propelled them to new heights.

The 17 minutes Queen spent on stage at Wembley Stadium during their Live Aid performance in July 1985 were 17 minutes which would both make rock history and transform the band for good. Though they'd enjoyed continued success with their platinum-selling 11th album *The Works* in 1984, as the mid-'80s beckoned, frontman Freddie Mercury found himself disillusioned and searching for something new.

"We were all forming a sort of a rut," Mercury said at the time. "I wanted to get out of this last 10 years of what we were doing. It was so routine. It was like, go to the studio, do an album, go out on the road, go round the world and flog it to death, and by the time you came back it was time to do another album. After a while it's like a painter… you know, you paint away, and then you stand back and look at it in perspective. That's exactly what we needed. We just needed to be away from each other, otherwise you just keep going in that routine and you don't even know if you're going down."

Live Aid: "The day music changed the world."

The answer, it turned out, was Live Aid. A benefit show pulled together by Bob Geldof and Midge Ure in aid of the Ethiopian famine, the concert – dubbed by the organising parties as "the day music changed the world" – brought together some of rock's biggest stars over two venues in London and Philadelphia. In a day filled with memorable performances – here's looking at you, Led Zeppelin – Queen's Live Aid performance truly stole the show.

Kicking off with an abridged version of 1975 mega-hit *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Queen's Live Aid setlist tore through a medley of their best-loved hits: *Radio Ga Ga* gave way to *Hammer To Fall*, before *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*, *We Will Rock You* and a rousing *We Are The Champions* closed their set. This was all before Mercury and guitarist Brian May stole the stage during the show's grand finale with their acoustic rendition of *Is This The World We Created?* – a moment on which Mercury later remarked: "It looks as if we wrote *Is This the World We Created?* for this event, but we didn't, although it seems to fit the bill."

The performance helped transform them into a wonderfully camp, sleek and ubiquitous rock band, and the biggest British live act of the 80s. That their Live Aid performance provides the start and end point of recent biopic Bohemian Rhapsody further illustrates the pivotal moment the band's remaining members feel it played in defining their career.

Admittedly, a renaissance of sorts had begun with the videos for *The Works* singles *Radio Ga Ga* and *I Want To Break Free*. But it was their performance at Live Aid, where they were the only band smart enough to work out how to play all of their hits in miniature, that bought them back big-time – even though they hadn't appeared on the Band Aid single, and they had incurred the wrath of Steve Van Zandt after they played in Sun City in apartheid-era South Africa.

"I would have loved to have been on the Band Aid record, but I only heard about it when I was in Germany," Mercury said later. "I don't know if they would have had me on the record anyway, because I'm a bit old. I'm just an old slag who gets up every morning, scratches his head and wonders what he wants to fuck."

Before the Live Aid event, Freddie was clearer on his motivation for the show: "I'm not doing it out of guilt. Even if I didn't do it, the poverty would still be there. It's something that will always be there, to be honest, when you think about it. All we can do to help is wonderful things. I'm doing it out of pride, pride that I've been asked as well as that I can actually do something like that. And so basically I'm doing it out of feeling that one way all the hard work that I've actually done over the years has paid off, because they're actually asking me to do something to be proud of. I'm actually in with all the biggies and I can do something worthwhile. To actually sing something that's an integral part of what's going on, you know, and the song [*We Are The Champions*] seems to convey that anyway, without us thinking about it. That's what's magical, and I think that's going to probably bring tears to my eyes, I tell you, when I do it."

Legend has it that Bob Geldof's invitation to Queen to play at Live Aid ran along the lines of: "Tell the old faggot it's going to be the biggest thing ever…" Freddie, naturally, found that irresistible.

"I think Bob Geldof has done a wonderful thing, because he actually sparked it off. I'm sure we all had it in us to do that, but it took someone like him to actually drive. And it is like a driving force, to get us all to come together. We're going to do bits of *Bohemian Rhapsody* [but] basically, you're not trying to put across your new material or anything like that, you're playing songs that people identify with, and just make it a happy occasion. It's not a promotional thing, it's a thing where you just have sit back and think what you can do."

It was Geldof who best summed up the mood of Live Aid 1985 and Queen's impact on it. "Queen were absolutely the best band of the day," he remembered. "They played the best, had the best sound, used their time to the full. They understood the idea exactly, that it was a global jukebox. They just went and smashed one hit after another. It was the perfect stage for Freddie: the whole world. And he could ponce about on stage doing *We Are The Champions*. How perfect could it get?"

Freddie's long-term lover, Jim Hutton, had never been to a gig before Live Aid. In his memoir *Freddie And Me* he described the aftermath of Queen's all-conquering Live Aid performance on that historic day at Wembley Stadium: "When he came off, he rushed to his trailer and I tottered behind like a puppy. His first words were: Thank God that's over!' Joe ripped his wet clothes from him and dressed him. Adrenalin still overflowing, Freddie knocked back a large vodka to calm himself. Then his face lit up. As we stepped out of the caravan we met a grinning Elton John. "You bastards…" he said to Freddie.

Mercury was so good that day that the Royal Mail put him on a commemorative stamp. Just visible behind him in the Peter Blake design is Roger Taylor, who, given Freddie's more exotic origins, became the first living Englishman ever depicted on a British postage stamp.

Queen rotated around the stadiums of the world after Live Aid 1985. After their jaded years, they enjoyed an Indian summer of a career, having cemented their place as one of history's true great rock'n'roll bands.

THERE CAN BE ONLY ONE

In 1986, Queen provided several songs for the soundtrack to sci-fi/fantasy movie **Highlander**. The film's director Russell Mulcahy looks back on a cult classic.

Words: **Dave Everley**

Russell Mulcahy remembers attending a typically opulent party at Freddie Mercury's West London mansion, Garden Lodge, sometime in the mid-80s. After the festivities wound down, Mulcahy crashed in one of the singer's many guest rooms. He was woken the next morning by the bedroom door opening. It was the host, in ebullient mood.

"He went, 'Come on dear, come downstairs, I'm making you breakfast,'" says Mulcahy today. "And so I'm in his kitchen, just him and me, he's making me eggs and bacon. I'm sitting thinking to myself, 'Freddie fucking Mercury is cooking me breakfast. Wow.' It was so surreal."

The Highlander with romantic interest: "A wonderful, tragic love story."

Mulcahy was no stranger to working with stars of the Queen singer's calibre, even if they weren't normally frying up a couple of rashers of Danish for him. The Australia-born filmmaker had made his name as the wunderkind director behind groundbreaking promo videos for the likes of Duran Duran, Elton John and Rod Stewart before graduating to full-length movies.

His first film had been low-budget homicidal-pig-in-the-outback horror flick *Razorback*, released in 1984. But it was a very different film two years later with which he made his name – and provided his entry to the world of Queen.

Highlander was a time-hopping sci-fi fantasy in which a group of immortal beings battled each other with large swords, each ultimately trying to decapitate the rest. If the premise sounded preposterous, the cast list was anything but – it starred rising French actor Christopher Lambert as the film's protagonist, 15th Scottish clansman Connor MacLeod, and former James Bond Sean Connery as his mentor, a Spanish-Egyptian buccaneer named Ramirez.

It also had a solid gold soundtrack featured five new songs from Queen, whose career was back on a vertiginous post-Live Aid upswing. The songs would appear later that year Queen's new album, *A Kind Of Magic*, an unofficial soundtrack to the movie that would become the band's most successful studio album of the decade.

"Queen's music was the icing on it," says Mulcahy, as he prepares to look back at this cult classic. "I couldn't have hoped for a better band."

How did you get involved with *Highlander*?
I had done videos for Duran Duran, who were on EMI. And EMI were connected to *Highlander* in some way. So they sent me the script and I read it and totally fell in love with it. I went for a meeting and it went fantastically, and they said, "OK, great, you're in." And that was that.

How did you pick Christopher Lambert for the leading role?
Well, we were sitting around going, "Who's going to play the Highlander?" And the obvious list of the usual Top 20 in-demand actors from that time got passed around. Then I was flipping through this magazine and I came across this photo of Christopher from *Greystoke*, the Tarzan film. He had the most incredible eyes – they had this eerie immortality about them. So we met him, he loved it… and that's when we found out he could hardly speak a word of English! So we had a French guy playing a Scotsman and a Scotsman playing a Spaniard. (Laughs) Who cares!

> **"I'm sitting thinking, 'Freddie f**king Mercury is cooking me bacon and eggs!' It was so surreal."**
> **Russell Mulcahy**

The real-life Scotsman would be Sean Connery. What was he like?
I remember going off to meet Sean, who had read the script, at the Savoy Hotel in London. I get to the door and my knees are shaking, I'm pissing my pants, I'm petrified. All I can think is, "Oh my god, I'm going to meet 007." And the doors opens and there's this six foot three man standing there. He invites me in, we have a coup of tea and sandwich, and he turned out to be the most wonderful, wonderful gentlemen. He was into it a hundred per cent.

It's a fairly crazy plot. Did he tell you what he saw in it?
Yes, it was a crazy story, this fantasy that spanned centuries. But the thing that grabbed me, and grabbed everyone, was that there was a tragic romance to it. This guy MacLeod falls in love with a girl in Scotland in the 1500s. He can't get old and die, but she does. So he can never really fall in love again. It was this wonderful tragic love story.

What was it like working with Connery?
It was fantastic. I remember we got on a small plane to go up to Glencoe in Scotland, where we were filming. He gets in there, hands me a little glass, pulls out a bottle this very special Scotch someone had made for him. He said, "You've got to try some of this, laddie", and he gives me a shot. My god, this thing must have been 300 per cent proof or whatever the fuck it was. I was singing the blues all the way up to Scotland.

What was the shoot itself like?
Brilliant fun, but there was one hairy moment. The was one sequence featuring the Kurgan [the film's towering barbarian villain]. It was the big entrance, where he bashes through the door of this fort and says, "Where's the Highlander?"

Clancy Brown, the actor who played The Kurgan, was meant to leap from the stairs and cut this table in half. But this was Clancy's first day of filming with Sean, and he was so nervous. As he bashed through the door, he didn't cut the table straight down like he was supposed to, he

Clash of the titans: Clancy Brown and Sean Connery do battle.

ALL IMAGES: PRESS

Filming in Glencoe, Scotland: "The Scots were magnificent."

swiped across it. This candelabra went flying over the crew, the sword breaks and a shard flies over Sean's head. At which point Sean quietly walked off the set.

Poor Clancy's in the corner, going, "What the fuck have I done?" Sean's in his trailer, he's taken his costume off, and he says to me, "You need to talk to this young lad, because that's not what we rehearsed." And him and Clancy had a chat. Clancy was so apologetic, but Sean understood, and everyone was the best of friends again.

Clancy Brown was the perfect person to play The Kurgan – big, menacing, strange-looking…

He was totally into it. There's a bit in the film where his head is shaved, and he was totally into that. He would sit there, taking bits of pins and sticking them into his costume. I went, "What are you doing?" And he says, "It's all part of the ritual man, Kurgan's ritual." I'm, like, "Okay, whatever, sounds good…"

Can we talk accents? What instructions did you give to people, given that none of the actors were from where there characters were meant to come from…

With Sean we both agreed we didn't want to force any accents. When you get Sean Connery, you get Sean Connery. He didn't attempt to do any Spanish-Egyptian thing. That would have faked it out a bit – I mean, come on, it was Sean Connery. The rationale is addressed in the movie. There's one scene where a cop says to Christopher Lambert, "You talk funny, where you from?" And he replies, "Lots of different places." These guys have lived hundreds of years. They've probably lived in every bloody country in the world.

How did Queen's involvement in the soundtrack come about?

I loved Queen, I was a huge fan of their music, and I really loved the soundtrack they had done to *Flash Gordon*. So we contacted them and I think they were a little sceptical at first, but we invited them over to the edit studio in London and we showed them 20 minutes of cut footage – six or seven different scenes. All the band came over, and they came out and said, "That's really cool." So I thought we'd get one song out of them. But two days later we got the message back that they all wanted to write a song: Freddie wanted to write as song, Roger wanted to write a song, so did Brian and John. I ended up getting five songs in the end, which was amazing.

Were they your first choice? There's a rumour that Marillion were in the running to do it.

I think there was some talk of Duran Duran being involved early on. I love Duran Duran, but we wanted something with a heavier edge. Queen had that, but then they also gave us a song like *Who Wants To Live Forever*, which was just beautiful. I also got Freddie to do *New York, New York*, which he didn't want to do: "Oh god, come on…" I had to convince him. There's a snippet of it in the film, where MacLeod crosses the bridge at the end.

What was Freddie Mercury really like? Did you get to see a different side of him to the person up on stage?

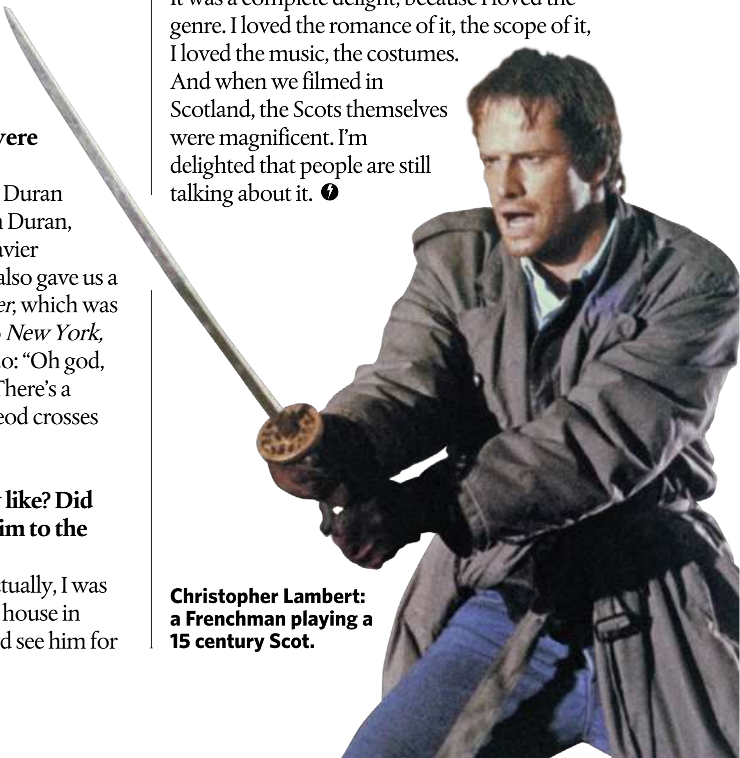
He was the most wonderful man. Actually, I was just living round the corner from his house in Earl's Court at that point, so I'd go and see him for lunch and just sit and chat and laugh. We became good friends. Same with Roger and Brian,.

Did you stay in touch with them?

Yes, especially with Freddie. We became really close friends. We'd go out and see opera and ballet – he loved that stuff. He also became friends with John Taylor from Duran Duran. Me and Freddie and John would go out with Roger Taylor from Queen. Or they'd turn up at my place and we'd play cards until 4am.

How do you look back on Highlander these days?

It was a complete delight, because I loved the genre. I loved the romance of it, the scope of it, I loved the music, the costumes. And when we filmed in Scotland, the Scots themselves were magnificent. I'm delighted that people are still talking about it.



Christopher Lambert: a Frenchman playing a 15 century Scot.

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"It's a miracle we're still together"

So said **Brian May** on the eve of Queen's 13th album, the aptly-titled The Miracle. In this classic interview from the time, the guitarist looked back on his band's rollercoaster career - and how their new record had brought them closer together than ever

Words: **Paul Elliott**

PHOTOSHOT

Queen's 13th album, *The Miracle*, was released in May 1989 and capped a rollercoaster decade for the band – one that had swung from the highs of *Another One Bites The Dust*'s monumental Stateside success to the lows of their much maligned disco and funk influenced 1982 album *Hot Space* and back up again to the twin triumphs of the Live Aid and Knebworth mega-shows.

The latter had been Queen's live swansong, but that didn't stop *The Miracle* becoming yet another huge success for the band, hitting Number 1 in the UK and across Europe, and yielding five singles including *I Want It All*, *Breakthru* and *The Invisible Man*.

Yet there was darkness behind the scenes. Freddie Mercury had been diagnosed with Aids before the band recorded *The Miracle*, although this remained a closely guarded secret within Queen's inner circle.

In this interview with weekly British music magazine *Sounds*, first published in the week of the album's release, guitarist Brian May discussed the making of *The Miracle*, the highs and lows of the band's career, and the price of fame.

It is now four years since Live Aid, when Queen stole the show.
I think Live Aid proved that we didn't need backdrops or cover of darkness. Bob Geldof called Live Aid a jukebox, so it seemed obvious to us to simply play the hits and get off.

You did exactly that, and it reinvigorated your career.
Well, we've always had our quiet periods and comebacks (laughs).

Have there been times when the band has lost its way?
Oh yeah. I think *Hot Space* was a mistake, if only timing wise. We got heavily into funk and it was quite similar to what Michael Jackson did on *Thriller*. But the timing was wrong. Disco was a dirty word.

Is Hot Space your worst album?
I don't know. There were things on other albums that didn't fit. But I think that those experiments were necessary to the overall growth of the band.

Was there a set plan when you made *The Miracle*?
When we came to make this album, we made a decision that we should have made fifteen years ago. We decided that we'd write as Queen, that we would credit everything to the four of us, so that nobody would leave a song alone. It also helps when we choose singles, because it's difficult to be dispassionate about a song that's purely of your own making.

Is there a downside to writing collective? There are tracks on the album – notably *Was It All Worth It* and *Hang On In There* – that are quite schizoid.
Yeah, they are schizoid. In that sense, it's much more like the old days. On the first few albums the songs would grow into strange shapes. I don't think any of the new songs escaped 'the treatment'. We thought *Hang On In There* had gotten a bit too obscure. Devotees of the band would get off on it, but it's not regular album material.

***Was It All Worth It* – with its orchestral flourishes – is rather kitsch.**
It is, really, and we were conscious of that – which is why there is a little hooter in there, because we thought, my God, we're really getting too overblown here! And there's an element of humour in there, in the lyrics, which is nice. It's a kind of conscious comment on some of the stuff we've done, it's sort of retrospective, and we did laugh at ourselves, which I think is good. We enjoy it, we like painting those pictures. It's fun, and it's something peculiar to Queen.

In the past, has that idiosyncratic sense of humour in Queen been a turnoff for American audiences?
Yes, I think our whole image became too diffused for America. They hated what they felt were gay overtones *I Want To Break Free* – the drag stuff in the video. Americans found that very distasteful, whereas everyone else around the world thought it was a laugh.

The gong show: Queen pick up a Brit Award in 1990

The first single from *The Miracle* is a big rock anthem: *I Want It All*. Was that a conscious move – to come back with a bang?
Yes, I suppose so. It re-establishes our old image in a way. It's nice to come back with something strong, something that reminds people we're a live group.

I Want It All is essentially a heavy metal song – like *Tie Your Mother Down* or *We Will Rock You* or *Tear it Up*. Are you the metal fan in Queen?
I love heavy metal and I don't look down on it at all. But we're not a heavy metal group. You have to love something to play it. When I produced Bad News (the spoof metal band created by The Young Ones stars Ade Edmondson, Rik Mayall and Nigel Planer), I found that Ade Edmondson lives and breathes heavy rock music. And I love people that are so immersed in it that it's serious. I love AC/DC – what they do, it's very pure. But we're not that way. We can't pretend we are. It's good to be able to step back and see the funny side of it, because it kicks out some of the shit.

"I expect the critics to say that we're an arrogant bunch of bastards like they usually do. But there you go."
Brian May

***I Want It All* has a 70s feel. It sounds at odds with what's in the charts in 1989.**
Just before we put the single out I started listening to what's on the radio, and the kind of stuff that becomes a hit these days bears no resemblance to what we do. But there are a few people out there who sit up when we do our stuff. I think the demographics are different for us. I don't think there are many thirteen year olds out there buying our records, and that age group is a large percentage of the record-buying public.

But Queen have always been a brilliant singles band – your *Greatest Hits* album proved that.
I don't think we're a singles band really. People only remember the hits. It's been pretty up and down with singles. But I suppose we've done OK.

There's one track on the new album, *Scandal*, which addresses the intrusive nature of the British press. It's something you've experienced recently since your marriage ended and your relationship with actress Anita Dobson was made public.
We've all been hauled through the tabloids now. It's very strange that we've been moderately famous for some time, but not tabloid fodder until the last three years. It's not been pleasant. Some papers want a certain kind of news, and it can wreck people's lives. I don't those papers have any sense of responsibility about it.

Were you shocked when you saw details of your private life being revealed in the press?
I thought it would never happen to me. I thought I was a very stable person and not open to anything like that. But life changes, you know? I kicked and screamed against it, but in the end you do change.

You grow, the people you're with grow, and sometimes you don't grow together.

How has all of this affected you?
It actually screwed me up completely. For nearly a year I was incapable, so depressed. It wasn't all because of the papers, but they don't help. Most of it they made up anyway, but there's no point denying it because you just make it worse.

Elton John hit back when he successfully sued *The Sun*.
Yeah, he was lucky because they put some 'concrete facts' in there which were wrong. But usually they're not that stupid. That kind of thing will make the papers a little more careful, but it won't change their fundamental attitude, because they can afford to pay out. I'm really glad that Elton did that, though.

In the title track from *The Miracle*, the words have a kind of hippie idealism. Do you expect to be lambasted by critics for that?
I expect them to say we're an arrogant bunch of bastards like they usually do. *The Miracle* isn't supposed to be us, it's supposed to be something we're looking for – peace on Earth – and that will be lambasted as crass idealism. But there you go.

There is also some typically dry wit in *Was It All Worth It*, in the line: *"Yes, we were brill."*
That's true. But we're pretty proud of what we've done, as a whole. We took chances. Some of the things we did set the world alight and some didn't. But at least we made our own mistakes. We did what we wanted to do. Music by democracy just can't be.

But you said that the whole of this new album is music by democracy.
That's a small democracy. Music by Gallup poll is what I mean. You can't go around and ask everyone if what you're doing is OK.

***Was It All Worth It* also has the line: *"Living, breathing rock'n'roll, this Godforsaken life"*. Really?**
That's Freddie. But that's very tongue-in-cheek, because he loves the life he has.

There's another line in that song about seeing "God and Dali". Is that self-referential too?
Yes. We got fairly surrealistic at some points!

And you've also written a song – *Khashoggi's Ship* – inspired by the famous stories about Saudi Arabian businessman and hard-partying playboy Adnan Khashoggi. Do you see in him a kindred spirit?
Oh yeah. I regard *Khashoggi's Ship* and *Was It All Worth It* as the two ends of the album, and both are comments on ourselves. We read about that kind of society life – the parties on the ship, the excess. We feel that we've touched on those areas at some time. We've been through it.

And despite it all, you're still going…
Yes. And without wishing to pun, it is a miracle that we're still together. We've been through such change. Sometimes you think you're in Hell and sometimes you think you've seen God. But if you live life to the full, it is that extreme.

GETTY X2

Brian May: "Some of the things we did set the world alight and some didn't."

Crazy little thing: Freddie Mercury on the set of the *I'm Going Slightly Mad* video, February 1991.

PHOTOSHOT

THE LAST GOODBYE

Even as his time ran out, Freddie Mercury was the driving force behind 1991's **Innuendo** and the voice from beyond the grave on 1995's **Made In Heaven**. Here's how Queen went out with a bang…

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★ Words: **Henry Yates** ★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

By 1990, the hounds of Britain's tabloid press were hot on Freddie Mercury's trail. Day and night, the Queen frontman's Garden Lodge home in West London crawled with reporters, his increasingly rare outings dogged by shutter-clicks and thrusted microphones. His pursuers had a common goal: to confirm the most open secret in rock 'n' roll, that Mercury was HIV positive, had AIDS – and was dying. But for now, the press would be forced to seize on crumbs of evidence for their splashes – most recently, Mercury's gaunt appearance at that February's Brit Awards – while Brian May parried them with the party line: "He definitely hasn't got AIDS, but I think his wild rock 'n' roll lifestyle has caught up with him."

In an age before social media, the silence from the Queen camp was absolute. Yet the band's public denials of Mercury's worsening condition were at odds with their musical output of the era, with the following year's Innuendo album all but admitting the singer's diagnosis, while diving deeper into his headspace than any tell-all interview.

"We were dealing with things that were hard to talk about at the time," May told *Guitar World*, "but in the world of music, you could do it."

Recorded at London's Metropolis Studios and the Mountain facility in Montreux, Innuendo was far too varied to be glibly cast as 'the AIDS album'. In Queen's grand tradition, these twelve songs pinballed between genres – the title track alone offered vaudeville drum rolls, flamenco guitars and a screaming hard-rock solo from May – and were inspired by themes as disparate as Taylor's cars *(Ride The Wild Wind)* and Mercury's calico cat *(Delilah)*. The effervescent *I Can't Live Without You* and the foot-down *Headlong* (a song originally mooted for May's solo career) hardly sounded like the work of a dead man walking. "The last thing he wanted," said Taylor of Mercury's defiant last stand, "was to draw attention to any kind of weakness or frailty. He didn't want pity."

Even so, at least three of *Innuendo*'s key songs offered a window into Mercury's mindset as the sand ran out. The singer's own *I'm Going Slightly Mad* paired an itchy, haunted verse to a lighter chorus, with an incongruous Hawaiian slide-guitar solo and gallows humour metaphors that stopped the vocal from becoming too bleak *("This kettle is boiling over/I think I'm a banana tree")*.

Chiefly written by May – but with Mercury setting the lyrical tone and insisting that the bleakly ironic working title remained – *The Show Must Go On* was darker still, led by the doomy chop of strings and a wretched lyric (*"Empty spaces/What are we living for?"*).

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

> **"We were dealing with things that were hard to talk about at the time."**
>
> **Brian May**

Sweeter – if no less affecting – was Taylor's *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*, the drummer yearning for blissful formative years when *"the bad things in life were so few"*. The gulf between those times and the here-and-now was starkly underlined by the US single's monochrome video, with Mercury rail-thin and rooted to the spot due to the stubborn lesion on his foot, but still giving a sparkle as he looked deep into the lens for the whispered pay-off: *"I still love you."*

The feeling was evidently mutual, at least in the UK, where both the Innuendo single and album reached No.1 without a sniff of promotion from the singer or the band setting foot on a stage.

"I think it's the best one for quite a long time," May told *Vox*. "There's nothing I'm embarrassed about. Often you put out an album and you think 'But I wish we'd done this…'. This one, I feel quite happy about, and I can listen to it without any problems. I like it a lot. I think it's nicely complex and nicely heavy, and there's a lot of invention on there."

The statue of Mercury in Montreux, Switzerland, immortalised on the *Made In Heaven* cover.

REX FEATURES

Queen had nothing left to prove. With Innuendo a worthy swansong, the obvious move for a man in Mercury's position would be to retreat from view, make his arrangements and run down the clock in peace. But as Taylor reflected in the *Days Of Our Lives* documentary, the singer saw his numbered days as a chance for a last late burst of creativity, whether to assure his own legend or arm his bandmates with material for the road ahead.

"The sicker he got, the more he seemed he needed to record," the drummer recalled. "To give himself something to do, some reason to get up, so he would come in whenever he could. So really, it was quite a period of fairly intense work."

May had a similar take on events. "Freddie just said, 'I want to go on working, business as usual, until I fucking drop. That's what I want. And I'd like you to support me, and I don't want any discussion about this'."

In the early months of 1991, the Mountain Studios were the backdrop for scenes that now sound impossibly moving, Mercury holding himself upright against the console, emboldening himself with vodka, pitting his ebbing talent against the ticking clock as he tracked moments like *You Don't Fool Me*, his final songwriting credit on *A Winter's Tale*, and his last recorded vocal with Mother Love. "He never actually finished that," May told *Guitar World*.

"He said, 'Oh, Brian, I can't do any more. I'm dying here'. It's incredible, he never seemed to let it get him down. He was always full of humour and enthusiasm. He would make jokes about it, really.

"At the time," May continued, "strangely enough, we developed such a great closeness as a band that [the last sessions] were quite joyful times. There was this cloud hanging over, but the cloud was outside the studio, it wasn't inside. I have really great memories of those times."

Mercury's sanguine outlook, reflected the guitarist, gave him an "invincible" air. But it couldn't last forever. In early November 1991, Mercury stopped taking his AIDS medication; on the 22nd of that same month, he gazumped the gutter press by releasing a statement confirming his condition.

"Following the enormous conjecture in the press over the last two weeks, I wish to confirm: I have been tested HIV positive and have AIDS. I felt it correct to keep this information private to date in order to protect the privacy of those around me. However, the time has now come for my friends and fans around the world to know the truth. I hope everyone will join with me, my doctors and all those worldwide in my fight against this terrible disease."

Two days later – while a media circus swarmed outside Garden Lodge – Mercury passed away, the cause of death cited as bronchial pneumonia. A small ceremony at a West London crematorium followed in short order, the singer's coffin swallowed by the flames to the strains of Aretha

Franklin. And although the devastated survivors had a hectic aftermath – from the star-dusted tribute concert at to May's solo single, *Driven By You* – they were left with an unfillable gulf.

"Apart from the grief of losing someone so close," said May, "suddenly your whole way of life is destroyed. All that you have tried to build up for the last twenty years is gone."

As an emerging solo artist, May enjoyed solid UK hits with *Driven By You* and *The Miracle*-era offcut *Too Much Love Will Kill You*. But the guitarist would soon become reacquainted with the sharp end of the music business, taking his underrated 1992 solo album *Back To The Light* to the US for an ignominious tour where venues that could never have contained Queen were sprinkled with empty seats. Even so, he appeared to have drawn a line in the sand, insisting "my role now is to be me", and maintaining in an interview with Virgin Radio that "there cannot be a Queen without Freddie."

But perhaps there was still enough Freddie to sustain them. In the spring of 1994 came the early inklings of the project that would become 1995's *Made In Heaven*, as the three survivors began combing the vaults for sunken treasure. The guitarist's memory that he had "delved deep" was no exaggeration, with *The Game*-era material like *It's A Beautiful Day* gathered alongside the vocal parts laid down in Montreux earlier that decade. All of it, stressed May, was "very precious stuff".

So began the emotive "jigsaw" process of turning these pencil sketches into fully orchestrated songs. "There's tracks like *I Was Born To Love You*," noted the guitarist in the *Days Of Our Lives* documentary, "which was never a Queen track – that was a solo track, which Freddie did very hurriedly. So we stripped everything away, and lovingly, cherishingly re-edited all his vocals. I spent months and months piecing together our bits to make it sound like we were all in the studio together. I'm very fond of *Mother Love*. And it has a little piece of *Goin' Back*, which was the very first thing that Freddie ever sang in the studio. I wrote to Carole King to ask her permission, and she was delightful, she was so supportive.

"The whole album is a fantasy," May continued, "because it sounds like the four of us are there all together, having fun and making the album. Of course, for most of the time, when you're listening, that's not the case. It's built to sound that way. And a lot of love went into that."

"Brian and I, certainly, felt that we knew what Freddie would have been thinking," added Taylor in the same documentary. "We felt like he was almost in the corner of the room. We sort of got there. And I was very pleased with the result."

★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★★

"Freddie at the time said, 'Write me stuff, I know I don't have very long."

Brian May

REX FEATURES

Mercury with ex-lover Mary Austin, who was present when he died.

PHOTOSHOT

Freddie: one card short of a full deck

Measured in sales figures alone, there could be little doubt that the Queen hardcore – and more than a few fairweather fans – approved of the survivors' labour of love. Released on 6th November 1995, *Made In Heaven* topped the UK album chart, marching towards multi-platinum sales and spitting out five Top 20 UK singles. Stripped of context, few connoisseurs would argue this was the strongest album in Queen's auspicious catalogue. But there were moments here well-worthy of the brand, including the neck-tingling opening salvo of *It's A Beautiful Day*, the title track's rousing balladry and the impossibly moving *A Winter's Day*.

"The last album is one of the most ridiculously painful experiences, creatively, I have ever had," May told Radio 1. "But the quality's good, partly because we did have those arguments. Whether it's healthy for life or not is another matter."

Curiously, given the praise shortly to heaped onto The Beatles' cut-and-shut *Free As A Bird* single, press reaction to the album was somewhat muted, with *NME*'s memorably virulent review focused on the ethics of the project ("*Made In Heaven* is vulgar, creepy, sickly and in dubious taste"). In truth – and whatever your take on the album's musical merits – anecdotal evidence all points to the fact that this last hurrah was exactly what Mercury had hoped for in Montreux. "Freddie at the time said, 'Write me stuff, I know I don't have very long,'" explained May in the *Days Of Our Lives* documentary. "'Keep writing me words, keep giving me things, I will sing, I will sing. And then you do what you like with it afterwards and finish it off'."

By completing *Made In Heaven*, then, the Queen survivors had fulfilled their leader's last will and testament in the band's inimitable style, rather than leave it to industry vultures to crudely reanimate and repackage the sweepings. Perhaps just as important, they had exorcised the demons and drawn a line under the original band's extraordinary first run. As May remembered of the process: "You were just listening to Freddie's voice twenty-hours a day and that can be hard. You suddenly think, 'Oh God, he's not here, why am I doing this?' But now I can listen to *Made In Heaven* and it's just joy – and I feel like it was the right album to finish up on…"

The Greatest Show On Earth

As big as Live Aid, with an unfeasibly broad bill of rock, pop and showbiz stars, the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert was a fittingly flamboyant salute to the ultimate showman.

Words: **Johnny Black**

One of few shows to rival Live Aid for scale and spectacle, the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert commemorated the late Queen singer and raised awareness about Aids. Held at Wembley Stadium in April 1992, it brought together the worlds of rock, pop and showbiz – the former represented in the first half by Guns N' Roses, Metallica, Def Leppard and Extreme, while the second half found Queen members Brian May, Roger Taylor and John Deacon backing A-list rock and pop stars including Robert Plant, Elton John and George Michael, with Liza Minelli and Liz Taylor for good measure. An estimated one billion tuned in to this unlikely collision of worlds – not to mention David Bowie intoning The Lord's Prayer.

Brian May (guitarist, Queen): The night Freddie died, we said: "Well, we should give him an exit in the true style to which he's accustomed."

Harvey Goldsmith (promoter): Queen's manager, Jim Beach, took control of it all. He came to me with a proposal to do a show at Wembley Stadium. They had a wish-list of artists, so we had to ring round to see who was available. Jim had already sorted out some names. Liz Taylor was one. She was involved in Aids campaigning through her friendship with Elton, so when the tribute concert came up she was already interested in the cause.

Wendy Laister (publicist): The biggest problem in the run-up was that a gay activist group, ACT-UP, stated that Guns N' Roses shouldn't be on the show because Axl had allegedly made some homophobic remarks. That was difficult to handle because Axl didn't talk to the media, so we had to rely on the members of Queen speaking up about that issue.

Brian May: It was a massive strain on our shoulders because we weren't just performing, we were also organising everybody else. It was difficult enough just choosing the acts who would appear. We argued a lot among ourselves about the bill, but the basic criteria for the acts finally selected was their relevance to Freddie.

Harvey Goldsmith: Rehearsals were held at various places: Nomis Studios in London, Bray out of town near Windsor and then finally, the day before the show, in Wembley Stadium.

Terry Giddings (Freddie Mercury's personal minder and chauffeur): The rehearsal at Wembley Stadium was great. Everybody turned up on time and nobody seemed to mind hanging around. Tony Iommi was so patient, and George Michael was there the whole time even when he wasn't rehearsing. People would start out trying to do the songs like Freddie, but then they'd have to give up and just do it like themselves.

Joe Elliott (vocalist, Def Leppard): In one sense the day of the show was light-hearted and up. People popped in and out of each other's trailers and dressing rooms all the time. On the other hand, there was definitely a real sadness, and it was obviously different in Queen's trailer.

Brian May: I was very nervous at the Wembley tribute. I get like that if it's an unfamiliar situation, and I was worried about forgetting to introduce people.

Spike Edney (Queen's keyboard player and musical director): I'd become sceptical of events like this. It seemed that anybody who didn't get on the Live Aid bill made bloody sure they appeared at any charity gig that came along afterwards, cynically seeking the exposure as a big boost to their careers.

Joe Elliott: Axl was in the next room to us. Elton told us he knocked on his door and Axl's big security guy said: "Axl's sleeping." And Elton said: "Well I'm doing a duet with him in four hours!" And the guy shrugged his shoulders and shut the door in Elton's face. So Elton comes into our dressing room and says to us: "What the fuck's wrong with that guy?" Elton had a little rant and a cup of tea and then he took off.

> **"Elton storms into our dressing room: 'What the f**k's wrong with Axl?' He had a rant, a cup of tea and then took off." Joe Elliott**

Mark Cox (audience member): Extreme were the first band on. They were quite big at the time. But it was weird that they played a load of Queen songs in a medley. It was like seeing a pub tribute band without the Freddie lookalike.

Gary Cherone (vocalist, Extreme): It was the biggest show broadcast – it was bigger than Live Aid. That was probably the best collective day of our lives. Because we got to meet David Bowie… I could talk to you forever about it.

Harvey Goldsmith: The atmosphere backstage was surprisingly uplifting. Nobody caused a fuss or tried to pull rank. Everybody accepted the running order, because we explained to them that it had to be that way just to allow the show to flow.

Joe Elliott: Our [Def Leppard's] performance was really tricky, because Rick's [Allen] electronic drum kit isn't your standard kit, it's all about plugging cables in. And they plugged Rick's kit in upside down, so he was hitting his snare drum pedal and making a bass drum sound. If you watch the raw footage of the gig, you can hear him flapping around trying to get them to unplug it and plug it in the right way round. ➔

More excitement than a night at the opera.

REX x2

Slash 'n' Brian: two generations collide.

Terry Giddings: Guns N' Roses seemed to be genuinely in awe of everyone else. They seemed to me like humble, gentle people.

Mark Cox: There was a lot of controversy about Guns N' Roses, but they got a great reception. Axl Rose wore a T-shirt that said 'Kill Your Idols'. In the circumstances that seemed a bit tasteless.

Terry Giddings: I was looking after Liz Taylor. Axl came running off the stage with two huge minders, and as he came into the holding room he ran into Liz. I remember the shock of seeing them run towards her, but then she smiled, and you could see that despite the mutual embarrassment there was respect.

Joe Elliott: Duff McKagan was FUBB. I stepped over him when he was lying on some stairs backstage. He was just a mess. That was after Guns N' Roses had finished their set. I watched it, and Duff was flawless. He's a brilliant bass player. But he was mullered.

Mark Cox: I enjoyed all of the bands, even Spinal Tap, but I couldn't wait for Queen to come on. You know – fucking-well get on with it! That's what we were here for. And they started with *Tie Your Mother Down*, with Joe Elliott and Slash.

Brian May with George Michael: "When he sang Somebody To Love it was like Freddie was up there."

REX FEATURES

Joe Elliott: Brian said: "I want you to do *Tie Your Mother Down*, but you're only on in the second verse because I want it to start off with just the three of us." I said: "Hey, it's your gig!"

Slash: I was about to go up with Queen, and I had my shirt off and something was wrong with my pants, so I had my pants down to my ankles. And I heard this voice, and someone was introducing me to Liz Taylor. I pulled my pants back up and just went: "Er, nice to meet you."

Tony Iommi: I was really proud to play with Roger Daltrey and, of course, Queen that night [on *I Want It All*]. It was a very raw experience. It had been building that way for weeks in rehearsals.

Mark Cox: Robert Plant did a good version of *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*. *Innuendo* wasn't so good.

Robert Plant: Freddie said they'd written it as a tribute to Led Zeppelin, but I couldn't get my head around the words. I tried to learn them on holiday in Morocco, but I ended up with a huge lyric sheet taped to the stage.

Elton with the ever-controversial Axl Rose.

GETTY

Harvey Goldsmith: Bowie delivered the performance of the day. Even *The Lord's Prayer*, I felt, was right.

Mark Cox: Seeing David Bowie was a big deal. But when he dropped to his knees and starting reciting *The Lord's Prayer* I couldn't believe what I was seeing. It was meant to be an emotional moment, but a lot of people around me were laughing.

David Bowie: I felt as if I were being transported by the situation. I was so scared as I was doing it. A couple of my pals were sitting near Spinal Tap and they were speechless with disbelief.

Joe Elliott: Doing *All The Young Dudes* was the best three minutes of my life in front of an audience – my favourite song in the world, ever, with Queen as the backing band, fronted by Bowie, Hunter and Ronson. Phil [Collen, Def Leppard guitarist] didn't want to do it. I grabbed him by the ear like a headmaster, pulled him out on stage, and said: "You're doing this!" It was Ronson's last ever performance on stage.

Mark Cox: The best singer was George Michael. The jacket he wore was terrible – he looked like Don Johnson in *Miami Vice*. But when he sang *Somebody To Love* it was like Freddie was up there. Elton was good too, especially with Axl [on *Bohemian Rhapsody*]. But George Michael was just incredible.

George Michael: It was probably the proudest moment of my career, because it was me living out a childhood fantasy: to sing one of Freddie's songs in front of 80,000 people.

Wendy Laister: Anybody who imagined Axl was homophobic obviously didn't see him with his arm round Elton John during *Bohemian Rhapsody*. I know for a fact that a few days later Axl wrote a letter to Brian saying how proud he had been to be part of it all.

Mark Cox: Seeing everybody singing *We Are The Champions* was a great way to end the show. It was a great send-off. The fans were still singing Queen songs when we were all queueing for the Tube.

Elton John: People said: "You didn't go on for *We Are The Champions*," but I felt that I didn't want to get involved in the bunfight. It was a very moving day, but I just felt kind of numbed by it. My feelings were that I'd rather it was Freddie up there than me.

Joe Elliott: When we'd finished the *We Are The Champions* bit, I was following Brian off and I grabbed his sleeve and said: "Brian – turn round and look at this, because you might not ever see this again." He stood there and had a long look. And then he said: "Thanks, Joe." And he gave me a big hug and then buggered off.

Harvey Goldsmith: The party downstairs at the Hard Rock afterwards was a strange feeling. Elation and deflation at the same time.

Joe Elliott: It was amazing. You'd be standing there knocking back the free booze and Liz Taylor would breeze past. People like that are beyond celebrity. She was wearing a diamond the size of a football.

Tony Iommi: Immediately after the show was over, in private, it hit Brian very hard. Hit them all. It was so, so sad. John was just in bits. It was a case of: "Right, that's it, over, final."

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REGULAR JOHN

He came, he conquered, he vanished… We salute the life and work of **John Deacon**, whose absence from Queen's world is something to be respected, not regretted.

Words: **Joel McIver**

There is a truth universally acknowledged when it comes to rock bands, which is that the singer is an extrovert, the guitarist is desperate for attention, the drummer is a moron – and the bassist is the quiet one who avoids the spotlight.

In the case of Queen, only two of these four stereotypes apply, but they apply to the absolute maximum. Freddie Mercury was, as you've seen elsewhere in these pages, the ultimate prancing pop peacock; John Deacon was the bloke who actively avoided personal glory, because he neither needed nor wanted it. Or, as Roger Taylor told The Daily Mail in 2018, "John's a sociopath, really."

That sounds nastier than Taylor meant it to sound, no doubt. Technically a sociopath is someone who can't cope with everyday society, but in a more mundane sense it means someone who can't be arsed to deal with other people's nonsense. We all feel like that sometimes, and after the career he's had, who can blame Deacon for opting out?

The basic facts reveal that Deacon was just another everyman like the rest of us, at least until Queen took off commercially. He was born on August 19, 1951, which means that he's 67 as you read this, not particularly old for someone who's been retired for the last 22 years. He comes from Oadby in Leicestershire, a small town in the middle of nowhere, and he was a clever kid, sailing through his grammar school exams and becoming an electronics geek as a teenager. He put that talent to good use in later years, building the 'Deacy' guitar amplifier for use in Queen.

By 1965 Deacon was playing guitar in a school band, The Opposition, and switched to bass the following year. The band went nowhere, like most school bands, and he went to Chelsea College in London in '69 to study electronics. Two years later he auditioned for Freddie Mercury, Brian May and Roger Taylor and joined Queen, becoming either their fourth or seventh bassist, depending on which source you consult.

"The band took off so I went with it – at least I was guaranteed 20 quid a week, so it was worth having a go. Then it seemed to snowball and take over my life," he told *Bassist* magazine in 1996, revealing both financial practicality and mild impatience in a single quote.

All these years later, the popular idea that Deacon was simply a quiet guy has been exaggerated into him being crippled by shyness, unable to cope with fame and so on. In fairness he didn't do much to stop this perception taking hold, as evidenced by the famous story of him being too scared to meet Prince Charles and Lady Diana at Live Aid. Apparently he sent Queen's tech Spider in his place, with the royals shaking Spider's hand, none the wiser.

> **"The band took off so I went with it. The it seemed to snowball and take over my life."**
>
> **John Deacon**

But the real character of any musician is revealed in the music, not in their everyday demeanour – and if you look into Deacon's songwriting for Queen in even slight detail, you discover a talent that was both deep and expressive. Bass guitar was his instrument, and he played it with gobsmacking taste and precision, but Deacon's bigger talent was arguably his knack for writing world-class songs.

Look at Queen's 1975 pop hit *You're My Best Friend*, which he wrote for his wife Veronica: it's a piano-led pop song in which the bass is supportive and restrained. Like all great songwriters, Deacon knew that melody and dynamics should be at front and centre; like all great bass players, he knew when not to play, instead choosing to serve the requirements of the song. Likewise 1984's *I Want To Break Free*, where there's almost nothing to the song apart from Mercury's spiralling vocal melody, a synth wash and a simple rhythm section arrangement. This was economical, unselfish songwriting that resonated with millions of people.

Then again, the flipside of this was true too. *Another One Bites The Dust* and *Under Pressure* were both massive, Deacon-penned hits that begin with a huge bass part that is the songs' best-known feature. Without his bass part, there's really no song, in both cases.

So was there any rock'n'roll heart to Deacon? Apparently so, although in a more subtle way than the OTT stories we all know about Queen.

He is known to have enjoyed getting pissed quite a lot. Asked about a stressful recording session in Munich, May has been quoted as saying: "We were all in a perilous place where our emotions were out of control. It manifested itself in way too much drinking, a certain amount of drugs, which I didn't share… [John] could be very outgoing and very funny, but I think some of the stuff that happened in Munich gave him a lot of damage." May added

Mr Bassman: John Deacon onstage in the mid-'70s.

GETTY

that the outcome was "John disappearing to Bali and seeing God or whatever."

There was clearly a taste for adventure behind Deacon's calm exterior. He once admitted that during Queen's 1985 break from activity, "I went spare, really, because we were doing so little. I got really bored and quite depressed."

This being the case, you might expect him to emulate a bassist of similar character from a previous generation of rock – Led Zeppelin's John Paul Jones – and spend every minute of his spare time on music. However, this wasn't how his career turned out. Although Deacon must have been in constant demand as a celeb bassist and producer, he did relatively little session work over the years.

He played with Hot Chocolate singer Errol Brown on an unreleased 1986 single, *This Is Your Time*; recorded bass on two Elton John album cuts; and also appeared in the video for *Stutter Rap (No Sleep Til Bedtime)*, a 1987 single by unfunny novelty act Morris Minor & The Majors. It's on YouTube – have a look, he's the one in the blue wig.

Aside from those infrequent collaborations, he also assisted his own bandmates – playing bass on Mercury's song *How Can I Go On*, doing a remix of Taylor's *I Cry For You* and even assisting May's chums Anita Dobson and Minako Honda. Across an entire career, that's hardly a lengthy CV.

Nor was a successful solo career ever likely to transpire for Deacon, although it's interesting to note that he made at least two attempts to start one. The first was with a band simply called Deacon, which played a show at Chelsea College before he joined Queen.

The second was a more sustained effort involving a trio called The Immortals, in which Deacon was joined by singer and guitarist Lenny Zakatek (known for his work with the Alan Parsons Project and elsewhere), and drummer Robert Ahwai. The band recorded a song, *No Turning Back*, which appeared on the soundtrack of the much-derided 1986 film *Biggles*. The single cover features Deacon and the others in vintage flying gear, and, like the movie, it went nowhere.

Queen was John Deacon's real creative home, of course, and his role in the band was crucial. We know that he was integral as a bassist and songwriter, and that he enjoyed a close writing partnership with Mercury, but he also prided himself on being a part of the business decisions behind the band.

"If I'd just been a bass player all my life with the band, if that had been all my input, I wouldn't be as satisfied as I am because I only consider that as part of what I do," he mused. "There's the songwriting and also being involved in the decision-making processes – arguing or whatever – which is nice; to be able to have a part in the band's destiny."

After Mercury's death in 1991, Deacon is generally supposed to have lost all desire not just to be in Queen but to be a regular working musician. He hasn't said much on the subject apart from the oft-quoted "There is no point carrying on; it is impossible to replace Freddie" from *Bassist* magazine, and he simply doesn't do interviews any more. So who really knows what his frame of mind is? Even May and Taylor barely deal with him any more, the odd business-related email aside.

Most of us might find it tricky to sink into

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JOHN DEACON'S BASS GUITARS

Broadway Solid and an EKO
His first basses

Fender Jazz
Sunburst/rosewood fingerboard and natural/maple fingerboard

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Jetglo and black models

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1967 sunburst/rosewood fingerboard

Fender Precision
Natural/rosewood fingerboard

Music Man Stingray
Sunburst/maple fingerboard

Fender Precision fretless
Sunburst/maple fingerboard

Fender Precision
1954 Masterbuilt sunburst/maple fingerboard

Kramer Custom DMZ4001
For the 'Play The Game' video

Fender Precision Special
Grey/maple fingerboard with matching headstock

Fender Precision Elite 1
Red/maple fingerboard

Wal Pro Mark 1
Ownership uncertain

Warwick Buzzard
For the 'Friends Will Be Friends' video

Fender Precision
Black/rosewood fingerboard with gold hardware

Roger Giffin P/J
Custom order

Deacon and Mercury: Queen's funk and disco wing.

obscurity after the adulation Queen received, but Deacon seems to have mastered the fine art of doing very little. Apparently he likes "holidaying in Biarritz" (thanks, Queen's fanclub magazine) and playing golf (the *Mail* again) but otherwise he's a man of leisure. Mind you, he has six children. As any parent knows, looking after even one ankle-biter is properly exhausting.

What he's actually done as a musician since '91 is as follows. There was the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert of 1992, and he played with Genesis and Pink Floyd at an EMI private party. In '93 he played a fundraiser with Taylor to raise money for the King Edward VII Hospital in London, and then in 1995 he performed a guest spot with the Spike Edney All Stars, a bunch of Queen session musicians, at London's Shepherd's Bush Empire.

In 1997 Deacon had a busy year, leaving the house not once but twice. First he played with May and Taylor alongside Elton John, performing *The Show Must Go On* at the launch of the Bejart Ballet in Paris. Then he recorded *No-One But You (Only The Good Die Young)* for the Queen Rocks album – and promptly vanished. He didn't bother turning up when Queen were inducted into the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame in 2001.

Media interest in Deacon has been relatively subdued in the interim, although the occasional image of him out and about doing everyday things has surfaced. Attention has largely been focused on May and Taylor, thanks to their Paul Rodgers and Adam Lambert projects, as well as the *We Will Rock You* musical – which, according to May, he never attended.

> **"John could be outgoing, but I think the stuff that happened in Munich gave him a lot of damage."**
> **Brian May**

There was one slightly juicy story in 2002, when Deacon was pictured enjoying the company of a semi-naked pole dancer, said to be named Emma Shelley. The pictures are still available online but they're not particularly attractive. They just show a faintly knackered-looking bloke in his fifties admiring a nearby female. The tabloids got into a froth, though nothing official was said on the subject by Deacon, Shelley or anyone else.

With the resurgence in Queen's popularity on the back of the *Bohemian Rhapsody* movie,

DEAR JOHN

The greats pay their respects...

LEE SKLAR (Phil Collins, Toto, James Taylor)
"I performed at the first Rock In Rio festival in 1985 with James Taylor—we were on before Queen on that show. All I have to say is that it took me a day to lift my jaw off the floor. I sat with my mouth agape watching one of the most professional shows I'd ever seen. I'm such a huge Queen fan and John created some wonderful bass parts."

MARK KING (Level 42)
"John's role in Queen is often overlooked, given the larger-than-life characters he was in the band with, but having played many of his bass-lines with Brian and Roger, and having had the pleasure of standing stage-side watching him perform on tour in Germany back in 1986, I was in awe of his ability to always do the right thing for those great songs. Top man and a top player."

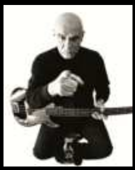
BILLY SHEEHAN (Mr Big, Winery Dogs, Sons Of Apollo)
"Queen were a huge band, real musicians—I was a big Queen fan. John wasn't instantly noticeable. The voice and guitar usually mean everything to the public, but the public don't realize that the bass and drums are probably the most important element. He was a great, great, solid bass player and I love when a guy can jump between genres and do it convincingly."

NATHAN EAST (Eric Clapton, Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson)
"John not only laid down the bass to Queen's big hits, but he composed several of their Top 10 singles, like 'Another One Bites The Dust' where the bass-line identifies and drives the tune home. It made it all the way to my neighborhood."

NEIL FAIRCLOUGH (Queen + Adam Lambert, Elio Pace)
"It feels very special to play John's bass-lines. 'The Fairy Fellers Masterstroke' is a tour de force, as is 'The Millionaire Waltz.' I've heard that John never wanted to be told the chord progressions, because he wanted to do his own thing. There's the functionality part of the bass which John performed great, and then there are the lovely parts he created without stepping on anyone's toes. When you hear the back end of *Sail Away Sweet Sister*, it's a lovely trail-off part and you're actually saying 'Keep going, keep going!'"

NEIL MURRAY (Brian May, Black Sabbath, Whitesnake, Rainbow)
"Having played many of John Deacon's bass-lines live around 3,000 times, I'm a great admirer of his creativity and solidity as a bassist. A nice chap too!"

PAUL TURNER (Jamiroquai, Annie Lennox, Take That)
"My dad was a big fan of Queen, and *A Day At The Races* and *A Night At The Opera* were two albums that we shared time listening to over and over—and over! John's sense of melody and counterpoint, and his ability to add tasteful sub-hooks and runs, were key ingredients in the band's music. Quality."



PHIL SPALDING (Robbie Williams, Tina Turner, Elton John, Mike Oldfield)
"Is there anyone in the music world who isn't familiar with the intro bass riffs to *Under Pressure* or *Another One Bites The Dust*? There lies powerful and irrefutable evidence of John's enduring influence on popular music culture. Freddie Mercury once said to me, 'I must always know what the bass is doing.' John always supported the song and the singer perfectly, as if he were a modern-day Motown bass player. He always played the right thing for each song, giving his more flamboyant bandmates the space they needed to do their respective things. Queen without John's musical sensibility would have been a very different animal."

DAVE SWIFT (Jools Holland)
"Considering John was known for his quiet demeanor, he quite often displayed some fearless and audacious playing in Queen. He clearly wasn't afraid of playing exposed bass-lines and fills in the upper registers of the instrument. Listen out for all those tasty triplet fills, and some truly bodacious playing up 'the dusty end'!"

GETTY

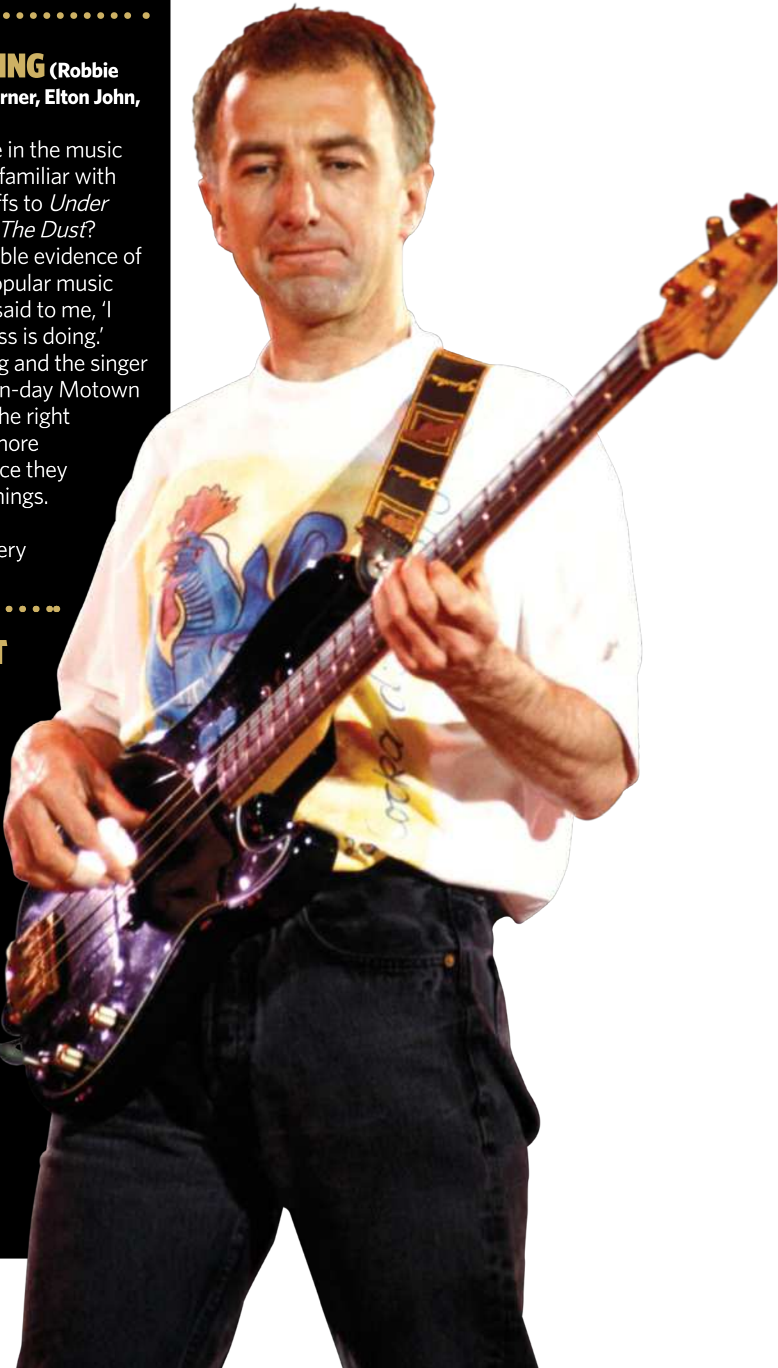
"If I'd just been a bass player, I wouldn't be as satisfied. I only consider that as part of what I do."

John Deacon

you'd think Deacon might at least show up for a celebratory drink with May and Taylor. Inevitably, Deacon was nowhere to be seen. Who knows where he was? Probably sitting on his sofa in Putney, watching it on TV and sipping a cup of tea.

Make no mistake – this doesn't mean that Deacon is boring, or introverted, or a spoilsport. It just means that more than two decades of touring and recording with the most exciting rock band ever seen was enough for him. He evidently doesn't feel the need to get involved with the celebrations, because for him, the celebrations stopped in 1997. Why chase that validation, or indeed the money, all these years later, when there's no need for either?

Ultimately, that is John Deacon's victory.



John Deacon: "Top man and top player", according to Level 42's Mark King.

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In 1975, Harry Doherty interviewed **Queen** as they released *A Night At The Opera*. Over 30 years later, he sat down with Brian May, Roger Taylor and new singer Paul Rodgers to talk about the band's latest incarnation and their comeback album *The Cosmos Rocks*.

"This is different from before but the same, sort of."

Brian, Paul and Roger: cosmic times.

PRESS

Back in November 1975 I was granted an audience with Queen. It was shortly before the release of the band's magnus opus, the career-defining *A Night At The Opera*. I witnessed a group fussing and fretting – over what they would probably call the imminent escape of said record – so much so that they went back in the very next day and started remixing the whole blasted thing.

Almost 33 years later, I find myself in a state of déjà vu, but this time in a parallel universe. With Freddie Mercury sadly long departed, John Deacon gone, having taken on the mantle of enigmatic recluse, Brian May and Roger Taylor are now on the eve of releasing the first Queen album in almost 13 years, this time in collaboration with the legendary blues-rock icon, vocalist and founding member of Free and Bad Company, Paul Rodgers, joining them to create *The Cosmos Rocks*, under the banner of Queen+Paul Rodgers.

And again they seem to be facing the immediate future with the same sort of creative wariness, although this time they don't have money worries.

"Well, the time around the release of *A Night At The Opera* was a period of crisis for us," recalls Taylor. "Our backs were right to the wall financially. We had sold a lot of records and not been paid a lot of money – the old, old story really. So that album was our big shot. Had it failed, we probably wouldn't have been around much longer.

"Apart from that financial crisis, I suppose it is the same in a way with the release of *The Cosmos Rocks*. However, I don't think people really expect anything with this. But as then, we have got all this new material, *and* we have proved that we are a creative force and entity, and that this is a viable operation."

For the beginning of this "viable operation", we have to move back in time to September 2004, to the Fender Stratocaster anniversary concert at Wembley Arena when Brian May found himself on stage with Paul Rodgers – as the worthy substitute on guitar for one of his own heroes, the late Paul Kossoff – on Free's *All Right Now*. From these humble, chaotic beginnings, the regeneration of Queen would begin…

"We came off stage knowing that the chemistry had flowed. It just seemed so natural to do that. It was Paul's girlfriend, who is now his wife, Cynthia, who looked at us both and said 'Something happened on there, didn't it?' She said 'All you guys need is a drummer', and I said 'Actually, I know a drummer!'. It started off as a very small thing, as in 'let's do something with Paul and see what happens'."

Faster that you could say 'we will rock you', a month later, Rodgers was joining May *and* Roger Taylor at the induction of Queen into the UK Music Hall Of Fame, with *All Right Now* joined by *We Will Rock You* and *We Are The Champions* in a slightly less chaotic but memorably historic mini-set.

"There wasn't really that much to it, other than'This is interesting'," reflects Brian May, bedded down in the car park of a huge industrial park in Tower Hill, London, where Q+PR are about to start the second phase of rehearsals for their forthcoming world tour. "But I have to say there was a moment there that was significant for me: when Paul pitched into *We Are The Champions*. It was so obvious that he was making it his own. It wasn't anything like Freddie would have done and yet it carried the spirit of the song which Freddie had written. I suddenly thought, 'This is a lot more than just playing this song; this is a new world that we can go into'."

Rodgers was reaching the same conclusion. When it's suggested to him that he probably thought this would be simply an interesting, but passing, experiment, he's quick to disagree: "A little bit more than that actually. When we were rehearsing the songs at the UK Music Hall Of Fame, we had the janitors – and all sorts of other people who had seen it all – popping their heads in and saying 'what the hell is going on in there?'. When we created excitement there, I thought that was pretty indicative of what we could have."

We will...

...we will...

INSETS: PRESS

rock you!

GETTY

The word soon leaked out to promoters that Queen and Paul Rodgers might consider touring together and offers poured in. When May called Rodgers to ask how he would feel about doing a tour, doing a set consisting of half Queen and half Rodgers catalogue (Free, Bad Company, The Firm, solo stuff), he was ready to take it to the next stage. But the singer insisted that the set should be "Queen-heavy" as they hadn't been visible for so long. And he was very aware that it was still an unexpected collaboration.

"I always admired them from afar, but I can't honestly say that I went out and bought all their records or knew all about them," admits Rodgers. "If someone had called up out of the blue and said 'How do you fancy doing this?', I would have been a little more hesitant, but as we had actually played together, I knew that it worked on a very exciting level. The simple raw power that was coming off that stage was so exciting that I was very willing to do more and see where it took us. And that has really been the motivation behind everything that we've done. There was a mutual feeling of 'This feels good, let's do more'."

And so it came to pass that Queen+Paul Rodgers (more about the much-debated moniker later) set off on a tour that was just to start with a few dates and blossomed into a world tour, taking in Europe, North America and Japan, with the shows soon reaching the grandeur that Queen were famed for. They played a "best-of-both" set.

"One thing I absolutely knew for sure was that it would not be shit, because of the calibre of the musicians I was working with in Roger and Brian."
– Paul Rodgers

"Well, it had to be, didn't it? We didn't really have any new material then!" laughs Roger Taylor. And now they've been together for three years.

"We all went into it with an open mind," adds May. "The essential base line was that it was organic; it wasn't something that was shoved together to get us back out there or rejuvenate us. It just happened because we got on with Paul and we were excited about working with the guy."

But from dipping their toes into the water, then their ankles and knees, Queen and Paul Rodgers were soon up to their necks in it. And apart from that, it was great fun.

"We took it one step at a time," Taylor explains. "It was really a case of 'Well, that worked, let's try this.' There was no master plan. Nobody really wanted to commit themselves that much. But I have to say that I'm really delighted to find myself at this stage in my life where we are. It's very exciting.

"Obviously, we hoped it would grow and looking back at one of those first gigs at the Brixton Academy, it was pretty rough and ready. I remember it being over loud and we really hadn't refined the process of working together. You've got to get that chemistry down, and it doesn't always happen, but there definitely is a great chemistry between us. Paul's given us a serious blues edge that we didn't have before, and I like to think that we've given him a walloping great wall behind him."

May points out that Rodgers had informed him the day before that this was the longest he had ever been in a band, and that includes Free and the initial glory period of Bad Company. The big test came as the tour was ending, and the consideration of what would happen next. It was after a gig in Vancouver that all concerned were saying their good-byes.

"Well, on those big tours, you're away from home for months and months and there does come a time when you long to be home," Rodgers explains. "So by the time everybody has reached the last show, they're very much on the flight home in their minds. But on this tour, the very last show was in Vancouver, and it was the best show we did – it was absolutely scorching. We came off and everybody hugged and it was a case of 'I'll see ya, for sure! We have to do some more.' We weren't sure what that 'more' would be, but the natural step was to go into the studio and see what happened. Brian actually said to me 'Let's do more, I don't want this to end'."

What would that "more" be though? To fans and critics alike, Queen carry a huge weight of heritage with them, and while most Queen fans first endured before enjoying the collaboration with Paul Rodgers, there were few who even in their wildest dreams felt that a Queen without Freddie something that could never, and *would* never, happen.

Paul Rodgers was certainly aware of their reputation and the sanctity that surrounded it too: "Well, the production on their records was really second to none. The clarity, the great guitar playing, the strength of their songs was always very powerful. They were extremely unique, working differently from everybody else. You have to admire that in a world that can get a little samey. They were never ever samey. They're full-on unique. And I think that's also what happened when we went into the studio."

Generally, May and Taylor have no hang-ups about past, present or future concerning the Queen legacy. "Strangely enough, we probably think about that stuff less than you would imagine," says May. "Everybody asks that question and they are aware of this legacy. But for us we just do what we do and what feels right. Maybe that sounds over simplistic."

It does. Nobody wanted to see them become their own tribute band, and there was a bit of concern that that actually might happen.

"Absolutely! The world which we live in is quite small really – Roger and me and Paul and a few people who work around us. Outside this boundary there is this huge interaction with the world which sometimes we're aware of, but for most of the time we're just doing what we do because we love it.

"There's always that pursuit of something wonderful; you know, the thing which you've never quite grasped before. That's the great thing about rock. There's never a boundary. There's always some place further. The passion for that never

Q+PR: "We took it one step at a time. It was a case of, 'Well, that worked, let's try this.'"

REX FEATURES/CUT OUT: GETTY

When Queen met Swan Song

When Paul Rodgers refers in our interview to "the giant organisation fondly known as the Queen machine", *Classic Rock* reminds him that he has been there before. He pauses before asking, "What do you mean?"

Swan Song/Peter Grant/Led Zeppelin, we say, the precursors and model upon which the Queen machine was based on. The organisation that also managed Bad Company.

Rodgers seems genuinely taken aback. "You know, that's an interesting question. I've never been asked that. It's true that one of the great things about coming together with Peter Grant was that they, the Zeps, had a very powerful organisation by the time they had reached that level of their fame.

He pauses to think about it. "So, yeah, maybe there are similarities," and suddenly remembers something from the distant past - "But funnily enough, I actually met Queen when they were auditioning managers and they were coming out of Swan Song offices in King's Road having had a meeting with Peter Grant and I was going in and we met on the stairs. And that's the only time I've met Freddie and I really wish I had met him more. I've met his family, his mum and sisters and relatives and they are lovely people. His mum particularly. She comes to the shows and is just a very very graceful lady."

goes away. So we don't ask questions of ourselves so much as the outside world does. We just allow ourselves to get on with it."

However, they did face two dangers in taking this from being a fun touring project into a band with a new album and all the seriousness that that step entails. Firstly there's the danger of it being a vanity project, and secondly can they be the same Queen brand as before?

"I don't think we thought of it in those terms. I can tell you that," May counters. "We just thought 'Let's make some music and let's make it good and let's see how far we can push things'. It's the same as the old days with Freddie: 'How far can we go in any direction? Can we find something that has never been found before?' That kind of thing…"

And then there was the name. Rodgers initially had doubts: "I'll be honest, when we started out I thought maybe we'd call ourselves May Taylor Rodgers, or something like that. But I didn't mind Queen+Paul Rodgers because I think it has a good identity."

Was there a big discussion about it?

"Not really, when Brian called me up and said how 'Do you fancy doing it as Queen+Paul Rodgers?', I took a deep breath and went 'Whoa!' But said, 'Let's give it a try and see it works.'"

Taylor says he didn't really know what they would call themselves. "We just thought it was going to be us and Paul and it would turn out to be what it turned out to be," he shrugs. "It was an organic process. There was no overall master plan really." And as far as he was concerned, the "us" was Queen.

Ever the pragmatist, May simply answers: "It's what we are. We had to call it something." Discussion over.

May, though, was prepared to spend a bit of time considering the talents of Rodgers *and* Mercury and the contrasts in working with both within the band framework.

Paul Rodgers: the ex-Free vocalist was "one of Freddie's role models"

"That's a very difficult question to answer. There are many similarities between Freddie and Paul and there are many interesting differences. But it's hard to put into words, just feelings really," he says. "Paul is a very creative guy and if you throw something at him, he will throw it back at you in a way that you didn't imagine. And that's exactly what Fred would do, lateral thinking was one of his great assets.

"Having said that, there are differences in the way the relationship worked. One of Freddie's great talents, strangely enough, was diplomacy. He was very good at getting Roger and I, for instance, to sort out our differences and work as a team. Why would Paul even know that that was part of what went on with us? Gradually, he has become part of that.

"Three is a strange number in a group. If you have two people that want to do something and one doesn't, then people can get pulled a long way in a certain direction. In the end we had to get to know each other very well to get this thing to work. But Paul brought some very different ways of working to us. He's very instinctive. You sing something for Paul, a tune you've got in your head. He will process it for a while and won't sing it at all until he feels it and understands it and then interprets it in his own way. So what you get back from Paul is – I'm tempted to say a blues interpretation because blues is very much a part of what he is – but it's more than that. Working on the album with Paul was a real voyage of discovery."

It seems that many old-school Queen fans have, or at least had, the misguided impression that Paul Rodgers had "lucked out" in getting the gig with the band, forgetting, of course, that the vocalist superseded Queen in many ways – rock history, chart success and the like.

"I think that was a fairly widely held perception. The fact is that Free were famous long before we were," Taylor emphasises. "Paul was one of Freddie's role models in a way. You'll find a lot of singers citing Paul as being the blues benchmark for rock vocalists."

"It's a very interesting territory we're marking out now," continues May. "It hasn't been planned. The links are there, though, very much with us, because Free was a great influence on us in the early days, and particularly an influence with Freddie. He really regarded Paul Rodgers as a hero. Those guys were stars before we were twinkles in each other eyes. Free were, and are, a great inspiration. *Fire And Water* was one of our reference points along with The Beatles and Hendrix."

And so, for the past two years, Queen have intermittently been holed up for a month at a time working on original material at Roger Taylor's fully-equipped home studio in Surrey. The only other attendees were the technicians who would help them record. Once they had made the decision to make an album together, it seems that Taylor became project manager. The drummer was the one that would pull it all together and present the packages to his partners when they re-convened. Brian May was busy finishing his PhD in astrophysics, among other academic pursuits ("He's only been working on it for a hundred and thirty years," jokes Taylor). Paul Rodgers lived on the West Coast of Canada and had other musical commitments apart from his part-time Queen gig. They had no bass player, so those parts were divvied up between May and Rodgers, both proficient players of the four-string.

Each of them would bring the early stages of what they had written to each session, although in the end, everyone's contribution was deemed worthy enough that all tracks would be credited as written by May/Rodgers/Taylor, something that never happened with the "old" Queen.

"You know, all musicians are buzzing round with ideas, all the time," said Rodgers. "The question is always 'Will your ideas gel with the other musicians and make a track?' And we found very excitingly that we could."

Of course, they were all rich enough to know that if what they were doing was a load of shit, they could just flush it down the toilet.

"One thing I absolutely knew for sure was that it would not be shit," laughs the singer. "Because of the calibre of the musicians I was working with in Roger and Brian, and as I know what I can do, I knew it would be something special."

Taylor agrees: "Absolutely! And some of the stuff didn't work. So those songs didn't make it."

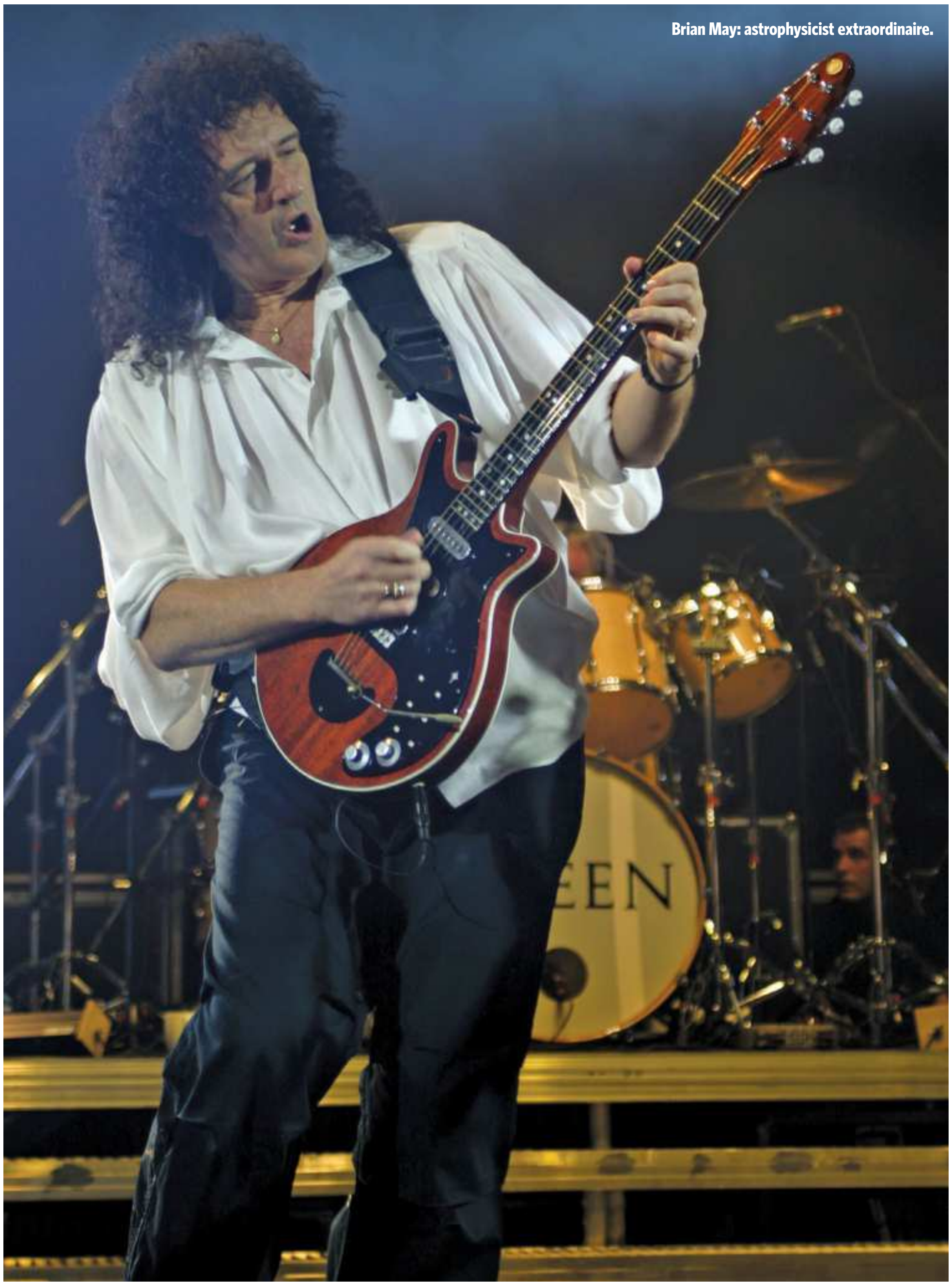
They were also aware that it couldn't be like anything they had done before, either as Queen or Paul Rodgers, who comments: "We had no preconceptions about going into the studio – 'just bring your ideas'. And the thing that I like about working with Brian and Roger is that they are very original musicians. They don't approach a song with the attitude of just putting guitar and drums on it. They have an approach of 'How can I put something on this that has never been done before even by me. And I'm like that too.'"

They're buzzing about the fact that many of the backing tracks came from one-takes live in the studio, on songs like *Voodoo*.

"On that track, I was just playing an acoustic guitar, Roger got on the kit and Brian was just playing his guitar, and we just jammed. And that went on the record pretty much as we recorded it. And that's not really what you expect from Queen, is it? Other songs have been full-on production with massive harmonies, but each song on the album is different."

It was quite similar in some ways to Queen's old studio methodology, Taylor reveals. "I was able to do a lot of preparation and then the others could pick and choose and then we would all develop the tracks. It didn't matter who had the first idea, we all developed the songs between us. It is a really good process, very creative. A proper group process!

"This is different from before but the same, sort of. The thing with Queen was that we were a real group. Everybody worked pretty much on everything. Certain things were little bits of flights of fancy or songs that involved pretty much one person. But a lot of it was absolutely the group, and everybody firing in ideas and everybody working as a unit. Like now."



Brian May: astrophysicist extraordinaire.

GETTY

I remember at that *Night At The Opera* interview in '75 in the immediate aftermath of recording the album, May seemed a bit distant, not quite sure if he had delivered the quality of work he could have. Insecure, almost. As we talked about the recording of *The Cosmos Rocks*, he seemed to be thinking too much again as he recalled the process of making the album. He had been immersed and engrossed in his PhD which he would work on on his trusty laptop while on tour. But once they had set deadlines to actually release the album, matters became much more serious.

"An album is a dreadful thing to do really," May ponders. "It's such a big part of your life and it always gets painful at a certain point. And this was no exception. We had a lot of fun, we did a few sessions over the course of a couple of years, but once you've got a deadline and you know you have to deliver, it becomes very serious indeed. The same old problems rear their heads. It's very difficult. In this case, it's three different artists with paintbrushes trying to paint the same canvas.

"You get to a point eventually where some really difficult decisions have to be made. It's a democracy. That's all you can say and that's the way it was in the old days as well."

Queen had all this worked out in their former life, I imagined. How did May react to the new third man?

"Paul's great. He's very mellow and very well adjusted. He's a very evolved human being. He's nice to work with, no doubt about it, but of course, he's also still a hero to us in some ways so perhaps we're very polite to him. He's still 'Paul Rodgers'. We get the moments where it's, 'Oh, that's *Paul Rodgers*'.

"Roger and I – for different reasons – are very polite to each other because we know how it can go. We're like brothers and we can fight badly; so we were all very polite to each other for a very long time and perhaps we didn't air the things that were worrying us. And, of course, there comes a point where suddenly the worries become crucial and you have to bring them out, and then it's a difficult time. But that's part of the creative process, and we all know it. You can't really make an album without that painful burden, so we buckled down to it and worked our way through it all."

So it *was* painful?

"Yes, the last bit was, particularly for me. We all have lives as well and to be sucked in to that extent that you can only eat and sleep and be in the studio is a painful thing in itself. It grinds you down after a while. The final mixes which is where a million decisions are made; the sequencing of the album, deciding who did what. It's like being in a new group. These things come with every bunch of boys that come together. Eventually you think, 'How much of this is me?', 'Am I represented?', 'Am I being marginalised?' All these childish concerns come up. You have to be very grown up to get through it."

But Brian knows he's made an album to be proud of. As does Roger. As does Paul. As would John. As would Freddie…

"I think it works well because we're not trying to recreate anything that any of us have done before. We're trying to be ourselves together, and that creates an entirely new entity," said Rodgers.

"I guess if it is successful, we'll be able to say, 'Well, there you go, we can still do it. That was part of the driving force really, that we can still be a cogent force," added Taylor. "I think of *The Cosmos Rocks* as a Queen album with a twist. Very much so, because Queen has been my life, my profession. Most of my professional life has been this band. I've almost got it stamped through my core, like a piece of Brighton rock. It's what I do, and we're lucky enough that people are still interested."

"We found that we could make a good noise. It comes from simple things like that," concludes May. "We had the equipment in ourselves to generate a good joyful sound. It's our love of rock'n'roll, and it's still there, thank God. Of course, there are strong elements of all of our past, of Queen, Free and Bad Company. But it's a new band."

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You can't replace Freddie Mercury. But in 2015 **Brian May**, **Roger Taylor** and crown prince **Adam Lambert** told Classic Rock how they were keeping the band's legacy alive.

Words: **Nick Hasted** Portraits: **Ross Halfin**

Queen REBORN

"My songs are like Bic razors," Freddie Mercury declared in Queen's early days. "For fun, for modern consumption. You listen to it, like it, discard it. Disposable pop." But 23 years after his death, his band's latest album is called *Queen Forever*. And that band's two remaining members, guitarist Brian May and drummer Roger Taylor, concede that for them the title is true.

"I understand people who say: 'There is no Queen without Freddie. Just leave it be,'" Taylor admits, "because that's what we felt, following his death. All three of us said: 'Right, that's the end of the band.' But the band just didn't seem to die."

May now believes that trying to lay Queen to rest with its singer was doomed from the start. "Even though both Roger and I were adamant it was over, it never went away."

The Queen machine has been cranked into its highest gear for almost a decade during the past 12 months. *Queen Forever* reworks three forgotten Mercury vocal tracks, alongside a collection of mostly neglected ballads, intended to reactivate interest in their catalogue's deep backwaters. Queen were added to *Classic Rock*'s Roll Of Honour as Band Of The Year, after triumphant tours of the USA, Far East and Australia with new singer Adam Lambert. In the US especially, a relative wasteland for Queen since the 80s, Lambert's flamboyant performances and solo stardom since contesting *American Idol* in 2009 (when he first performed with Queen) has helped raise them to new heights.

May and Taylor still have regular Queen band meetings. When they and Lambert speak to *CR* they are in the peculiar position of preparing to go back out on the road for Queen + Adam Lambert's first full European tour, while curating their late singer's legacy in *Queen Forever*. It's an odd afterlife which began with 1995's posthumously finished album with Mercury, *Made In Heaven*, continued with four tours and 2008's now virtually disowned album with vocalist Paul Rodgers, *The Cosmos Rocks*, and shows no signs of ever stopping. Queen's classic songs keep gaining new leases of life. But, as May and Taylor admit, they don't expect anything they do now to equal their music with Mercury.

Brian May, sleepy after a trip to Paris, calls *Classic Rock* on the phone, as does Lambert. Taylor meets us in his home studio, a stone's throw from the pub and golf club of a sleepy Surrey village. His mansion and the South Downs can both be glimpsed through the trees. Tracksuit-casual, his hair and beard white, Queen's drummer is the most bluntly forthright about their future in 2015. And he can't raise much enthusiasm for *Queen Forever*, for a start.

"I was very pleased we had three new tracks to put on it, which we laboured long and hard over," he says. "As well as the Michael Jackson track *There Must Be More To Life Than This*, there is another song Freddie did with him called *State of Shock* [later recorded with the Jacksons and Mick Jagger], with a massive rock sound. But we could only have one track with Michael, which is a great shame. *Let Me In Your Heart Again* is absolutely typical mid-period Queen. And it was Brian's idea to revisit *Love Kills*, which I feel works. But apart from that it is a rather odd mixture of our slower stuff. I didn't want the double-album version they've put out. It's an awful lot for people to take in, and it's bloody miserable! I wouldn't call it an album, either. It's a compilation with three new tracks. It's more of a record company confection. It's not a full-blooded Queen album."

"I can understand Roger's reticence," May laughs. "He's not really a ballad writer, so this album's not really representative of Roger Taylor. It actually wasn't our idea. If it had been down to me it would have been an EP of these new songs, but we'd already promised the record company some kind of compilation."

May still had strong feelings, hearing Mercury's voice again on the rediscovered tapes. "There's always a moment," he says. "Particularly with *Let Me In Your Heart Again*. When I put the original tape on, it was so astonishingly real, like it had been recorded that morning. I got quite emotional about the way

"After Freddie we said: 'That's the end.' But Queen just didn't seem to die."

Queen + Adam Lambert, shot exclusively for Classic Rock, London, November 30, 2014.

Freddie was doing his thing. It's like suddenly coming across recordings of your parents after they're gone. And then it turns into something rather joyful. In the old days I was often the one there at night anyway, trying to sort out takes that Freddie was all over. It feels comforting to be back in that situation. It's almost like Freddie's still around."

Are these three tracks the last active part Freddie mercury singer will play in Queen's story?

"Well in a sense he's always active, no matter what we're doing," May believes, "because I don't think we can ever go out there without Freddie being a part of it. We've been on tour in the States with Adam Lambert, and Freddie's already there because of the writing, and the original performances that we model the show on. But he's there also in a much more tangible way, because we use video footage. It's nice to feel he's part of it, without being swamped by nostalgia. I think we tread that line quite tastefully and carefully."

"There's never going to be another, and I'm not replacing him," Adam Lambert explains. "That's not what I'm doing. I'm trying to keep the memory alive, and remind people how amazing he was, without imitating him. I'm trying to share with the audience how much he inspired me."

Lambert's youthful energy, vaulting vocal range and American stardom have revitalised the band in the US over the last year. Queen's classic songs had already gained new audiences as they found their way into TV shows and films, from *Bohemian Rhapsody* in *Wayne's World* to *Somebody To Love* in *Glee*.

> *"If we have the material, then I wouldn't go into making a record with any other lead singer than Adam."*
>
> **ROGER TAYLOR**

"It's massive there now," May agrees. "What's changed is, Adam is the first person we've encountered who can do all the Queen catalogue without blinking. He has that range, and that affinity for things on the edge of camp that Freddie had. You can see people at concerts looking a little reserved at the beginning: 'Why are we looking at this guy from *American Idol* singing Queen songs?' After about three songs, they go: 'We get it!' They laugh, they cry, and it's a Queen show as much as it ever was. I don't think Freddie would mind me saying that, or that I'm being disloyal to Freddie. Adam's got that instrument, and goes for it."

Many singers have stood in for Mercury since his death, from the blues-rocking Paul Rodgers to pop star Jessie J at the Olympics Closing Ceremony. But Lambert has one possible advantage over his predecessors: he is extravagantly gay, in a way Mercury chose to imply blatantly. This seems to give his performances an authentic connection to Mercury, which Queen have lacked since 1991.

"All I know is, his theatricality and flamboyance

works with our music," Taylor considers. "Some of which is very theatrical and almost overblown, very big. He makes no bones about his theatricality, and he's on stage as an openly gay man – there's no pretence. So yeah, maybe!"

"It's a funny question," says May. "But sometimes I find my mind wandering down those paths as well, because so many of the greatest musicians have been gay. I wonder if there is a special kind of magic that appeals to girls as much or even more than boys. There's a kind of mystery there. But we're very at home with it, and sexuality has never been an issue in any sense. Although people think of Adam as being from *American Idol*, he actually comes from a theatrical background. That's another connection, because Freddie was very theatrically based too."

> *"It's a Queen show as much as it ever was. I don't think Freddie would mind me saying that."*
>
> **BRIAN MAY**

"I think maybe to some people it helps them understand me better," Lambert offers. "Maybe it creates a framework to understand my sense of humour, or put me into a category that's similar to Freddie. So yeah, it might give people a certain amount of permission to enjoy it, because it's drawing comparisons to somebody that they know is accepted. I don't think being gay is taboo at all now. People have moved on from that."

That certainly wasn't the case when Mercury changed his image with 1980's *The Game* album and tour: from the long-haired rocker of the band's early days to a moustachioed, more explicitly gay look. *The Game* was Queen's last US hit album.

"In America Freddie's sexuality definitely hurt us," Taylor admits. "We had people throwing disposable razors on stage when the moustache appeared, which was obviously a very iconic gay look at the time. And [in 1984] MTV wouldn't play *I Want To Break Free*, when we were all dressed in drag. It was a very narrow-minded station then. It just seemed to be all fucking Whitesnake…"

May says Lambert is "a gift from God", and the only reason Queen are playing now. Taylor describes his voice as "one in a billion". Their mutual respect has raised the prospect of brand new Queen music. But after *The Cosmos Rocks* Queen's veteran pair are wary of going down that route again. When I spoke to Paul Rodgers in 2014 he made clear his own unhappiness at the experience. "Politically, Brian and Roger were calling the shots," he recalled. "We'd done some amazing shows, and Roger had some hip, cool songs, but it could have been better."

"I guess, yeah," Taylor considers. "I had a lot to do with that album. It was made in this

Brian May: "I've become a more balanced human being."

Adam Lambert: "It's a once-in-a-lifetime thing."

Hell bent for leather, 2014.

REX FEATURES

> *"I'm not replacing Freddie. I'm trying to keep the memory alive, and remind people how amazing he was, without imitating him."*
>
> ADAM LAMBERT

room, actually. It had some great stuff on it. I just think that Paul's more blues and soul – one of our favourite singers, ever – but when it boils down to it he wasn't the perfect frontman for us. I felt the album was badly promoted by EMI, who were falling to bits at the time. We were on tour in Europe, and I went into record stores and we weren't in them. And I remember being furious, thinking: 'Why did we make this fucking record?'

"It certainly made us think twice about making a Queen album with another singer," he adds. "There's a resistance among the record-buying public to that idea, because Freddie was so inextricably linked with us. When you lose the brand, people aren't interested. That's why even Freddie's solo albums, or Mick Jagger's, or certainly mine, aren't going to break any sales records. People want the brand. It's a horrible word, but very apt."

"I wouldn't be averse to recording again," May considers, "but we haven't discussed it. And we

spent a huge amount of time making that album with Paul Rodgers, going through quite a lot of pain, and I don't think it made the slightest dent on public consciousness. So I would be cautious about being in a recording group called Queen without Freddie. Maybe we should be doing something else with Adam. Maybe we should be part of his recording future."

Lambert, with a third solo album to finish and a successful solo career to resume once this tour is done, is also politely noncommittal. "I'm so honoured to be performing with the group," he says. "It's a limited engagement, a once-in-a-lifetime thing. Getting in the studio and creating new music and calling ourselves Queen is a different situation."

"I'll say one thing," Taylor states. "If we have the material, then I wouldn't go into making a record with any other singer than Adam, because he is so perfect with Queen. He has the range and the talent. I certainly wouldn't be averse to giving it a go."

Taylor knows, though, that he and May will never have as strong a collaborator as Mercury again. With bassist John Deacon retired since 1997, the duo are Queen, and anyone else they work with isn't.

"You're right, of course," Taylor concurs. "With Freddie we were all contemporaries. I don't think there'll ever be anybody who will come into our group like that. But we very much respect Adam's ideas. He's incredibly musical, and we'd certainly take anything that he said quite seriously."

Does Mercury's loss, though, necessarily weaken any music Queen make in the future?

"Well, you're missing your best and prime songwriter," Taylor says. "We could all write songs, but Freddie was born to it. He constantly surprised us. I still don't know where some of his lyrics came from, they're so clever, almost Cole Porter-ish at times. Or like when he was writing all that slightly Tolkien-esque, proggy stuff. I never saw Freddie read a book, but he must have been a great black hole of information. That's why Brian and I haven't made more new music since he died, because we know we wouldn't bring the full arsenal that we had to the table. I have a deep suspicion Adam would fill some of that gap, but we haven't actually written anything with him yet. We haven't even discussed it between ourselves."

Taylor believes that he and May have lost some of the creative tension that left such productive blood on the studio floor in the 70s and 80s. "It's not the same as when there were four of us all pulling in different directions. We know each other too well, so we skirt around each other a bit. We know our strengths, so there's a tacit agreement on things."

Their musical extremes, too, have gone. "Part of Freddie's thing was to say: 'Too far's not far enough!'" recalls Taylor. "We used to like to stretch the boundaries in Queen if we could. But I don't think we stretch boundaries any more. We're good at what we do. We're prisoners of our own making, I suppose. It's not a bad prison."

"We haven't really recorded together for so long, I don't know how it would be now," says May. "Queen was a fight all the way along the line, sometimes quite destructively, and out of it all came a great strength. Roger and I still disagree about almost everything in the universe, but I think we've grown up some. We know when it's time to back off, though that's hard for us both. It's like brothers, I suppose. We still have our moments on email. Things get quite ugly there, generally about music, arguing over the smallest parts. Which I suppose shows that we still care."

Queen's original line up: four men "pulling in different directions."

GETTY

As May and Taylor ready themselves for yet another stadium blitz, decades after they thought they were done, do they see any natural end to Queen? Or has the music they made as young men become a job for life?

"Oh, definitely," Taylor says. "There comes a point where you realise: 'Don't think about the next thing, because this is what you do – this is what you are.' We are inextricably linked to this music. And I love making a racket in a big loud rock band. As long as we're fit I don't see any reason to stop."

"For the first half of Queen," May remembers, "we thought: 'I'm doing this now, but the rest of my life might be something different.' But this is what I have done with my life. I have been an artist, guitar player, writer, producer… and I'm proud of that.

"I've also become a more balanced human being than when we were rock stars touring nine months of the year and recording for three," he adds. "I've let other things I was neglecting back into my life. I spend time now working on defending animals, and with astronomy and stereoscopy [a Victorian form of 3D]. But when Queen calls, everything else takes a back seat.

"I think it still works because we don't *need* to do it, but we have a desire to do great things. That's never gone away. Like when I played on the roof of Buckingham Palace [for the Golden Jubilee in 2002]. Freddie was nowhere near it, of course, but it was part of the same desire to make fabulous things happen. And we couldn't do these gigs with Adam if they didn't still excite us."

"Brian's involved in so many other things, and he's protecting every kind of furry animal; nothing for the insects yet," Taylor laughs. "And I love boating, and doing a bit of shooting, where I've got a completely different set of friends. So the diary's full anyway. But it's that old-fashioned thing about security, and not being useless. I'd rather graft than go out to grass. But you do need a great frontman. And you need a full arena. Otherwise, forget it. If we felt we were struggling, that people were putting up with us, I wouldn't do it. I would hate for us to just fizzle out. That would be the end, wouldn't it?"

"JUST OUT OF THIS WORLD"

That's how his life in Queen was summed up by **Brian May** – or rather, Doctor Brian May, CBE – when he spoke to *Classic Rock* in 2017, with *Bohemian Rhapsody* still on the horizon.

Words: **Paul Elliott**

On July 18, 2017, when Queen + Adam Lambert played at the Air Canada Centre in Toronto, 20,000 people sang *Happy Birthday* to one of the band, who would be turning 70 just a few hours after the show ended: Brian May. Reaching such a landmark was a rather strange experience for Queen's guitarist – now Dr Brian May, CBE, let us not forget. "I can't really believe that I'm that age," he says. "It's really odd."

It has been a busy year for the doc. The Queen + Adam Lambert tour ran through North America and Europe, heading into the UK at the end of November. A 40th-anniversary box-set reissue of Queen's classic album *News Of The World* was released. And there was May's book *Queen In 3-D*, featuring hundreds of previously unpublished photographs that he shot on vintage stereoscopic cameras throughout his career with the band, plus his written account of Queen's history – as close as he has come to writing a full autobiography.

Twenty-six years since the death of Queen singer Freddie Mercury, and 20 years since bassist John Deacon retired from the music industry, May and drummer Roger Taylor are not yet ready to let go of the band they co-founded back in 1970. "I don't want to retire," says May, adding with a wry smile: "I'm just thankful that I got to this point."

May talks to *Classic Rock* about the past, present and future of Queen, the long-awaited Freddie Mercury biopic *Bohemian Rhapsody*, Axl Rose, Elton John, and why it would be nice if people called him 'Doctor'.

For many Queen fans it's taken a while, but do you feel that Adam Lambert has now really proven himself as the singer for the band?
He has. Adam is amazing, he really is. I constantly wonder where that came from. How did the universe manage to make that happen?

Could you see Queen making a new studio album with Adam?
I don't know. We enjoy interpreting the canon, the oeuvre, and that's as far as we've got.

Has this latest tour been fun, hard work, a bit of both?
It's still hard pressing the button to be away from home for two months at a time, more than a couple of times a year. But it's worth it because something great happens. There's magic, and you see joy in people's faces. It's what it always was. Somehow it's all worth it.

As the old song goes…
Apparently it was. And it is!

Is the Freddie biopic finished now?
We're finally seeing it coming to fruition, although I can't say too much about it. Eight years we've been working on getting it off the ground. Roger and I – to some extent against our will – have hung in there for all this time. But finally we've arrived at a place where we have the right director and the right script and we feel good about it. We're very conscious that we get one shot, and if we don't do it, someone else will do it badly. We will do it without avoiding anything – any aspect of Freddie. But we will try to keep it all in balance. I think if we get it right it will crystallize the way the world understands Freddie.

> **"Playing live you see joy in people's faces. It's what it always was. Somehow it's all worth it."**

How should he be remembered?
I think in Freddie's mind he was a musician and a creator first. So that's a perspective we want to keep. He was a family member second, with us as a group. It was a very strong thing, and we'd like that to be represented. And the whole thing about his sexuality and his flamboyance, if you want to call it that, and all the things that made him tick, they are also vitally important as well, and none of them can be ducked or smoothed over. We don't want to present him as some kind of unreal person. He had, like the rest of us, his great bits and his not so great bits. And in a sense there's a kind of superhero quality to him. I think if we get it right, people will appreciate all over again what a great bit of machinery Freddie was.

Writing in *Queen In 3-D*, you describe Freddie as being insecure.
He really was. He built this armour around himself. It's true of so many performers. And that's how Freddie was able to metamorphose into the performer that you saw on stage. He started off as someone very insecure but with massive dreams, and he made himself what he became.

You also talked about the creative tension between the members of the band – a sense of rivalry as competing songwriters.
I find that's true of life in general, not just for a group making albums. That feeling of being roped out of a situation is a powerful and dangerous thing. And I think it was true between all four us. There were areas that we didn't invade…

Meaning what?
Everybody writes songs about what is around them, but unconsciously the songs are always about what is inside them as well. I think that's universally true.

When Freddie delivered *Bohemian Rhapsody* – now seen as his masterpiece – to the band, what input did he allow you to have?
A lot of the time, with a song that came from Freddie the backing track would be piano, bass and drums, and that's your skeleton. They would be putting that down, and I would be on the control room listening and making comments. And I asked Freddie to have that spot for my solo – I wanted to have that verse spot and I would kind of sing it on the guitar the way I heard it.

When did you work best as a team?
I remember sitting down with Freddie in the Munich days and speaking about *It's A Hard Life*, ▷

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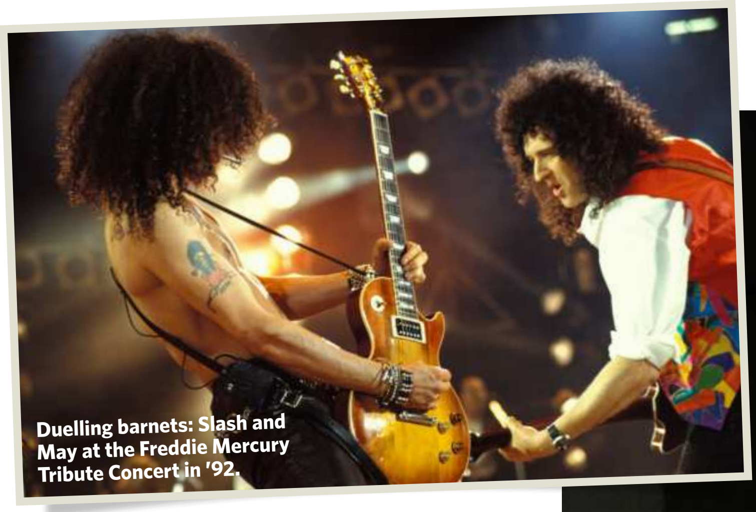
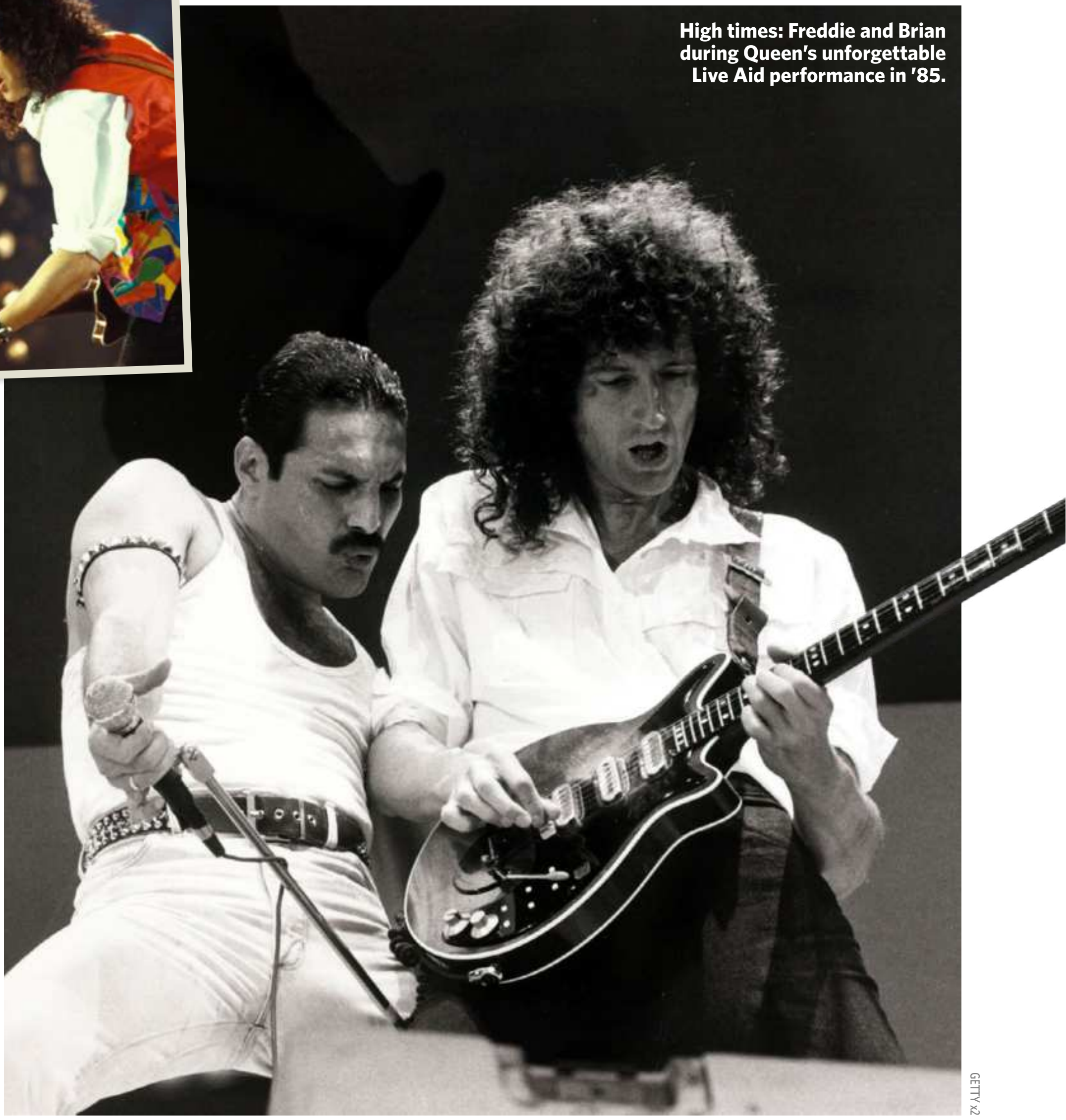
Killer Queen: Adam Lambert, Brian May and Roger Taylor on the *News Of The World* tour.



Duelling barnets: Slash and May at the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert in '92.



High times: Freddie and Brian during Queen's unforgettable Live Aid performance in '85.

GETTY x2

and hammering out every word of every line together, because we were actually talking about what this song meant. And I think also Freddie and John [Deacon] had moments of getting close to the inner meaning of a song. Freddie and John worked on *Another One Bites The Dust* very closely. John wasn't a person who could sing, so John would speak it to Freddie and Freddie would start to sing it, and I think during that process they would unravel what is this thing that we're doing?

Near the end of Freddie's life, when the band made the *Innuendo* album, did he need you more than ever?
Well, I remember Freddie and I sat for a long time working on the lyrics for *The Show Must Go On*. He was quite ill at that point, but he sat with me for a few hours working on a couple of lines. As far as the story of the song went, we were working on it together. But perhaps there was still a level of meaning beyond which we didn't look. He wasn't well – he disappeared and I didn't see him for quite a while – so I finished off the song using those bricks that we built together, the cornerstones.

In your book *Queen In 3-D* you recall a moment from 1977 when the band headlined at New York's Madison Square Garden for the first time, performing at such a high level that you felt as if you were levitating.
It was incredible. I'll never forget that feeling. It actually felt like our feet were not quite touching the stage. It was an amazing experience. It really did feel like that. It's not an exaggeration. I'm not being poetical.

In some ways, though, surely Queen never played a better show than the one at Live Aid in 1985?
Oh, it was really a great moment for us. We were used to playing stadia in South America, full of people who had all bought tickets that say 'Queen' on them. For Live Aid they'd all bought tickets for whoever was announced in the beginning, not us, and by the time we were added to the bill it was sold out. So that was in the back of our minds. What is this going to be like? Are they going to react? Are they going to relate? We had no idea. But as soon as we hit the stage it felt like it was our audience. That was the most amazing thing. It felt like everyone was a million per cent with us.

> **"If we get the film right, people will appreciate all over again what a great bit of machinery Freddie was."**

And for that show Freddie delivered the performance of a lifetime.
He was able to involve everybody, right to the back of that stadium. You could feel it. And you can see it in the video. I'm not sure we realised that this would happen, and that was extraordinary to watch, and extraordinary because it was an unusual talent to have in those days. Back then there weren't stadium bands, and most of the acts on that bill had never played in a situation like that. So really, Freddie had skills beyond the norm. We did as a band as well, but particularly Freddie.

It was at Wembley Stadium, the scene of Live Aid, that the Freddie Mercury Tribute Concert For AIDS Awareness was held on April 20, 1992, a little over a year after Freddie's death. Queen performed with a cast of singers, including David Bowie and Robert Plant. And on *Bohemian Rhapsody* there was a duet between Elton John and Axl Rose…
It was a magnificent coming together. And I'll never forget Axl's entrance in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, coming on like this whirling dervish. He was pure energy, Axl, and it was just what was needed, just what we'd hoped for, and more besides. The guys in Guns N' Roses are great. Slash is just a wonderful person. I'm happy to communicate with him, and we do on animal issues as well as musical issues. So there you have one of the world's great souls. And I'm thrilled that Axl and Slash got back together. I think that's what the world wanted.

Looking back on your life, what are you most proud of?
With music, the fulfillment is in knowing that it's done to the best of your ability, it's fulfilled a dream and it's become what you dreamed it could be. It's the creation of those things, and you know that no one else has done it, and nobody else could have done it quite in the way you've done it.

Is your PhD in astrophysics one of your greatest achievements?
It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. That's why people want to be called 'doctor' when they've got a PhD, because it didn't come easy.

Should I have called you 'doctor'?
No, you're fine [laughs]. But being called 'doctor', it's like badge you wear because you've been through such shit, such a challenge to your self-belief that you came through.

How would you sum up your life in Queen?
It has been unforgettable and unique and unrepeatable. Just out of this world.

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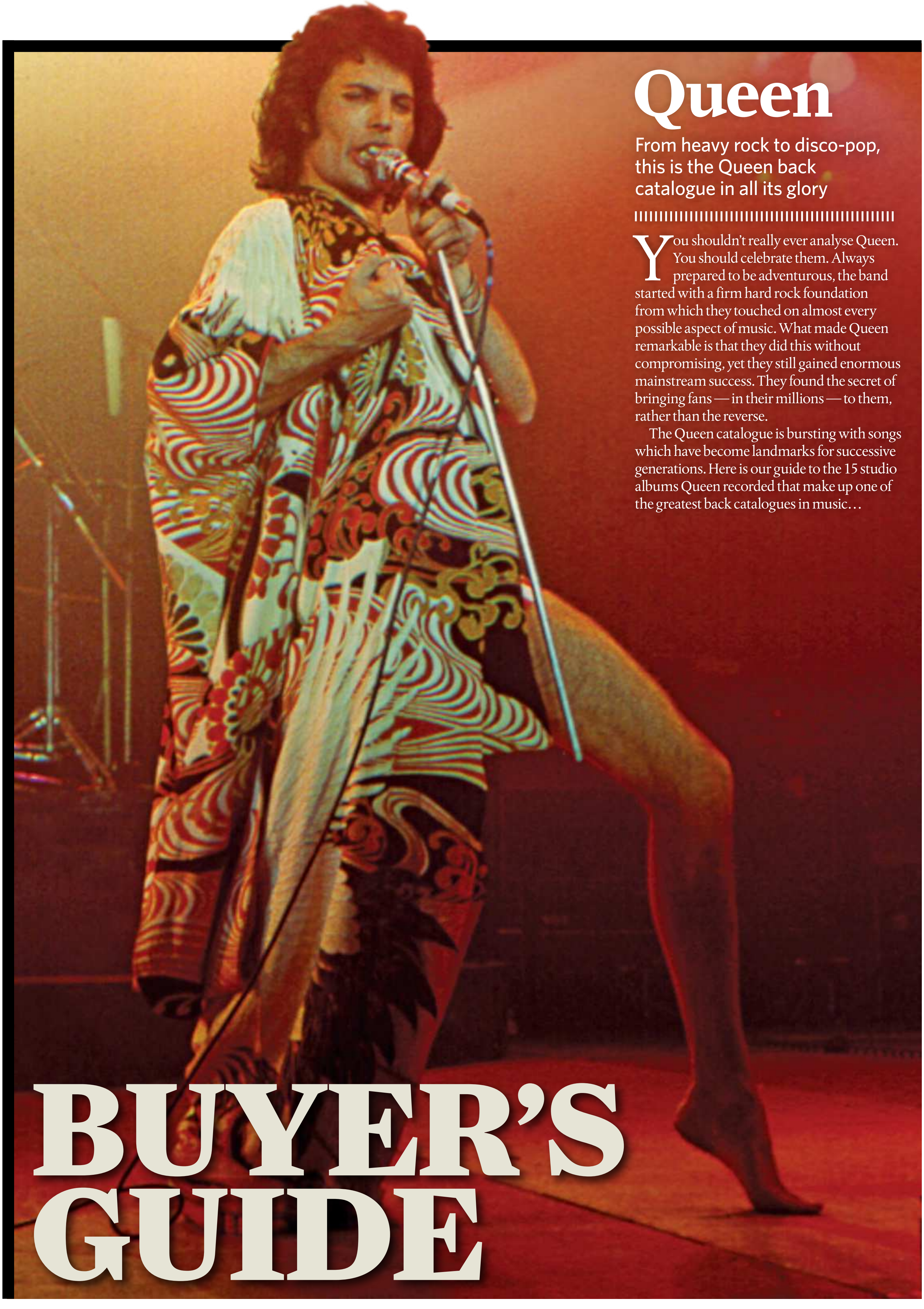

Queen

From heavy rock to disco-pop, this is the Queen back catalogue in all its glory

You shouldn't really ever analyse Queen. You should celebrate them. Always prepared to be adventurous, the band started with a firm hard rock foundation from which they touched on almost every possible aspect of music. What made Queen remarkable is that they did this without compromising, yet they still gained enormous mainstream success. They found the secret of bringing fans — in their millions — to them, rather than the reverse.

The Queen catalogue is bursting with songs which have become landmarks for successive generations. Here is our guide to the 15 studio albums Queen recorded that make up one of the greatest back catalogues in music…

BUYER'S GUIDE

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Essential Classics

Queen II

EMI, 1974

Queen's second album was arguably their heaviest while retaining the diversity their debut had promised. *Ogre Battle* hit the metal trail, *Father To Son* was eerily catchy and *Nevermore* was a prime-cut ballad.

]Stylistically it expanded on its predecessor, adding ever more baroque flavours and even presaging the future – *The March Of The Black Queen* was a dry run for Bohemian Rhapsody.

Queen II marked end of the first phase of their career. They had pushed their rock and metal roots as far as they could, and were clearly looking to expand their horizons – something they did in spectacular style.

A Night At The Opera

EMI, 1975

Yes, the one with *Bohemian Rhapsody* on it. But that was just one jewel in a crown studded with precious gems.

A Night At The Opera was the record where Queen delivered in terms of diversity. You want metal? There's *Death On Two Legs* and *Sweet Lady*. Pop? *You're My Best Friend*. Camp ditties? *Seaside Rendezvous* and *Lazing On A Sunday Afternoon*. Even a prog epic to match *Bo-Rhap* in the barking *Prophet's Song*.

Finishing with *God Save The Queen* was a moment when pretension, ego and self-deprecation collided perfectly: Queen in a nutshell.

Sheer Heart Attack

EMI, 1974

Queen's third album saw them pushing their style into even more diverse areas. They still had the hard rock roots, with *Stone Cold Crazy* among the finest fist-pounding anthems they ever recorded, while Roger Taylor's *Tenement Funster* was a classy tribute to youthful rebellion

Elsewhere the band dipped their toes into ballad territory (*Dear Friend* and *Lily Of The Valley)*, ragtime (*Bring Back That Leroy Brown*) and epic stadium rock (*In The Lap Of The Gods… Revisited*, which would prove to be a stage favourite).

The sound of a group on the verge of something spectacular.

News Of The World

EMI, 1977

Their sixth album opened with *We Are The Champions* and *We Will Rock You*, two songs that could easily overshadow the rest of *News Of The World*.

But that does the album a disservice. There were plenty of other highlights – the punk-baiting *Sheer Heart Attack* (which the band never finished in time for the album of the same title), Broadway-style showstopper *Spread Your Wings*, and steamy hard rocker *It's Late*.

This was the band in high spirits and flying. It continued the strong run of albums, while also proving they weren't prepared to stand still and merely repeat a winning formula.

Superior Reputation cementing

A Day At The Races

EMI, 1976

Most bands who had achieved a fraction of what Queen had with *A Night At The Opera* would have sat back and ridden the wave. But that wasn't their style.

From the opening fanfare that led into the relentless *Tie Your Mother Down*, you know this isn't going to be a wishy-washy sequel to *…Opera*. *Somebody To Love* had gospel harmonies, *Good Old Fashioned Lover Boy* owed something to Noel Coward, and *White Man* took a step into Native American territory. The band also showed their ability to surprise on *Teo Torriatte*, which included Japanese lyrics. This was innovation writ large.

The Works

EMI, 1984

After the mis-step of *Hot Space*, this follow-up worked the band's hard rock roots back into the equation without sacrificing the eclectic approach they'd spent their career perfecting.

The Works pressed all the right buttons. *Tear It Up* and *Hammer To Fall* were a vibrant return to guitar-saturated power.,*I Want To Break Free* is perfect mid-80s pop/rock – with the striking video clip featuring the band in drag – and *Radio Ga Ga* was… well, it was *Radio Ga Ga*.

While the album failed to make up the ground the band had lost in the US, it spent nearly two years on the UK chart. Queen were back in the game – and Live Aid was around the corner…

Jazz

EMI, 1978

Off-the-wall and idiosyncratic, *Jazz* offered some of the most satisfying moments in Queen's career.

The title reflected the fact that they felt they could go anywhere musically, and it took some extreme turns. *Mustapha* was a cod-Middle Eastern pastiche, *Fat-Bottomed Girls* was campy heavy rock, *Don't Stop Me Now* came on like a turbo-charged Elton John, while the maverick *Bicycle Race* offered up a chorus of bells in place of a guitar solo.

Jazz isn't a pure rock album, but its spirit reflects the fact that nobody understood better than Queen what rock music could achieve.

Queen

EMI, 1973

The album that started it all. While Queen's self-titled debut may have nodded to some of their more established contemporaries such as Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath, it had an identity all its own.

Maybe it was the unmistakable sound of Brian May's home-made guitar or Freddie Mercury's soaring, androgynous voice, or perhaps it was the panoramic production of Roy Thomas Baker, but *Queen* burst with ambition, virtuosity and great songs.

From the cast-iron *Keep Yourself Alive* to the galloping, shape-shifting *Liar* and *Great King Rat* to the heavy-as-lead *Son & Daughter*, this was the stuff on which legends were built.

The Game

EMI, 1980

Working with German engineer Mack gave Queen the opportunity to expand their sound – most notably breaking their own 'No Synthesisers' edict.

The Game featured the band's two biggest US singles, the rock'n'roll throwback *Crazy Little Thing Called Love* and the unfeasibly funky *Another One Bites The Dust*, as well as the soaring ballad *Save Me*. But the deeper cuts were far from fillers. Vicious live favourite *Dragon Attack* and *Rock It (Prime Jive)* are among the most underrated of all Queen tracks.

The Game trumpeted a new era for the band, although what followed slightly derailed them.

Innuendo

PARLOPHONE, 1991

The last true band album, *Innuendo*'s surface bombast masked a wistfully nostalgic undercurrent. The epic title track – featuring a guest appearance from Yes guitarist Steve Howe – nodded back to their grand 70s heyday, while the suitably potty *I'm Going Slightly Mad* could have easily slotted in on *A Night At The Opera*.

Perhaps most poignant of all was *These Are The Days Of Our Lives*, which ended with Mercury's whispered paean *'I still love you'*, which was moving and heartbreaking in equal measure. Tragically Mercury succumbed to an AIDS-related illness at the end of the year. *Innuendo* proved to be a fitting send-off.

World of leather: Queen in 1980.

GETTY

Good Worth exploring

Hot Space

EMI, 1982

The most controversial album in Queen's back catalogue, and one that continues to split fans today. Much of the antipathy is directed at the old Side A, which indulged Freddie Mercury and John Deacon's love of disco, funk and dance music – not what Queen fans expected, or wanted.

But Side B is a real gem. Here, the band revert to type – *Put Out The Fire* is a blazing anti-gun invective, *Life Is Real* is a heart-stirring tribute to the recently murdered John Lennon, and the Bowie collaboration *Under Pressure* is simply one of the greatest singles either party ever released.

It all adds up to an album that belies its reputation as a dud.

A Kind Of Magic

EMI, 1986

Queen's second movie tie-in of the 1980s, after *Flash Gordon*. Five of the songs were included in the time-travelling sci-fi fantasy movie *Highlander*, and while *A Kind Of Magic* was never written and recorded as a soundtrack album, it became one by default..

The style here swept across the rock spectrum, playing to the band's strengths. And wherever they trod, Queen still managed to be grandiose in the manner only they could achieve. Songs like *A Kind Of Magic*, *One Vision* and *Who Wants To Live Forever* quickly became iconic, while the piano ballad *Friends Will Be Friends* and the *heavy Princes Of The Universe* were hardly slouches.

The Miracle

PARLOPHONE, 1989

The band's final album of the 80s was originally going to be called *The Invisible Men*, which would have hardly been appropriate for such a high profile band.

The mix of styles ranged from the progressive title track to the riff-heavy *I Want It All* and the electro funk of *The Invisible Man*. *Scandal* was especially noteworthy, written by May as an attack on the UK media, who'd hounded him over his relationship with actress Anita Dobson, and their gossipy speculation over the health of Freddie Mercury.

If the 80s production date-stamped it all, Mercury's vocals and May's agitated guitar work more than compensated.

Made In Heaven

PARLOPHONE, 1995

Released four years after Freddie Mercury's death, this posthumous album was one part tribute, one part emotional release.

Mercury had instructed his bandmates to keep writing songs for him to sing even as his health failed. Several of the songs come from those final sessions, posthumously polished, while the rest consist of previously recorded solo tracks from each member given a 90s makeover.

It's inevitably disjointed, but the sheer weight of emotion holds everything together and there are frequent glimpses of Queen's sheer class on the likes of *A Winter's Tale* and the title track. Freddie would have been proud.

Avoid

Flash Gordon

EMI, 1980

Given the uproariously campy nature of 1980 sci-fi blockbuster *Flash Gordon*, Queen were the perfect band to come up with the soundtrack – a largely instrumental affair.

The thumping *Flash's Theme* is one of the great Queen singles (and features some prime dialogue from the film, not least Brian Blessed's immortal battle cry of "Gordon's alive!"), while The Hero (the only other track with lyrics) isn't far behind.

The rest of the album has a tongue-in-cheek grandeur – albeit delivered with a straight face – that fits the film, but without the visuals much of the music's impact is lost. Not awful, just inessential.

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THE SHOW MUST GO ON

As the *Bohemian Rhapsody* biopic finally arrived in cinemas in 2018, **Brian May** talked to *Classic Rock* about the rocky road to its completion, the "bullshit" tabloid rumours, and why casting Sacha Baron Cohen as Freddie would have been a "disaster".

Words: **Henry Yates**

Brian May can laugh about it now: the fired directors, the departed leading men, the eight agonising years when the Freddie Mercury biopic, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, crawled through production, up among the leaders in the bad-luck stakes. "I think the best thing is to look forward, and not back," the ever-diplomatic Queen guitarist considers when asked for his crowning head-in-hands moments.

At last, *Bohemian Rhapsody* is here – and despite that difficult birth, early signs suggest it's one of the best rock biopics of recent times. From the forensic detail of the sets and costumes, to a soundtrack that takes in unreleased live tracks, this is a time machine for Queen fanatics. But it would be nothing without the lead performance of Rami Malek, whose note-perfect turn is the puzzle piece that May never thought they'd find. "He absolutely smashed it," the guitarist says. "It's not enough to look the part. He inhabits Freddie."

Did you ever think that this project wouldn't make it?
Oh, there were about a thousand moments when we doubted it was going to get made. It was a very bumpy ride, but that's the way life is sometimes. Things are not always straightforward, and perhaps in the end they're better for it. In a way it mirrors the actual history of the band. We hardly had a smooth path in Queen, but some of those moments of adversity do make you stronger, and it's the same for the film. I wouldn't even hesitate to say I think it's wonderful.

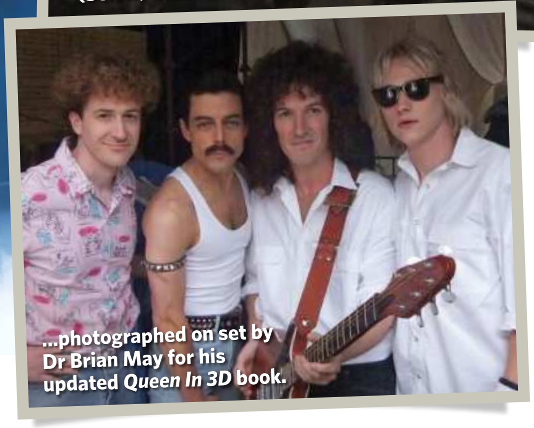
How do you feel when you watch it – happy, sad, nostalgic?
All of that, yeah. Joy and horror and sadness and all those big emotions. I've seen it hundreds of times now, in fragments and eventually coming together, and it still gets me, I must say. It's very emotional. It's all about Freddie. Yes, we are in there, but the story is about Freddie and that was always the aim. Obviously Freddie is so precious to us. One of the great breakthroughs early on was [screenwriter] Peter Morgan saying: "This is a film about family." It's about all the stuff that happens in a family – some good, some bad, the going away, the searching for independence and then the nurture of the family. It's a film about that stuff, on one level, and then it's about Freddie's emerging talent, his amazing resilience and sense of humour. ⊳

"It's a film which portrays the truth, in a fairly gritty and honest but also entertaining way."

JOHN MCMURTRIE

A star is born: Rami Malek as Freddie Mercury in the film *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

Before and after: the young Queen cast before and (below) after wardrobe…



…photographed on set by Dr Brian May for his updated *Queen In 3D* book.

The film ends with Queen playing Live Aid in 1985. Was there a temptation to go beyond that?
No. I think there's a natural culmination there. And that has pretty much always been the case, from the earliest scripts. We felt that was the pinnacle – despite what some people have said in the press, who know fuck-all about it. Somebody who shall be nameless said: "Oh, they're going to portray Freddie dying in the middle of the movie, and then the rest of it is gonna be about life without Freddie." Well, complete bullshit. This is all about Freddie, and I think Live Aid is a good point to leave it. Who knows, there might be a sequel [laughs].

Was playing at Live Aid one of the best days to be a member of Queen?
It was an amazing moment. And pretty much unexpected, because we were the last band to be booked on the bill, and it was all sold-out before we were even announced. So we knew it wasn't a Queen audience, and we went on not expecting much, feeling a bit like the outsiders. To see that response was mind-blowing. And you'll see that in the film – and from our point of view, too, which is what you can't get from a documentary. You're looking at a fantasy recreation, but it's astonishingly real.

Finding the right person to play Freddie was always going to be a nightmare, wasn't it?
I think we all thought it would be difficult. At some points we thought it was impossible. But along came Rami, and we had a great feeling immediately.

I suppose if Sacha Baron Cohen had kept the lead role, you'd never have found Rami?
Well, that was a near-disaster. I think we realised just in time what a disaster that was going to be. And it actually wasn't rocket science to figure that out. But yeah, that's one of the rocks that we nearly hit. I think we were all nervous in the beginning, when the casting process was going on. Because yes, that's a real tough thing to contemplate – somebody playing the part of you. The guy who plays me, Gwilym Lee, I spent a lot of time with him, so he understood me. He'd be picking up my mannerisms and what makes me tick. So when Freddie and me are in the studio, confronting each other, it's very real. Some of it was improvised, but they did it with the knowledge that they understood us from the inside out.

Is it an entirely flattering portrayal of Freddie, or does it show his flaws, too?
Yeah, it shows everything. Nobody thinks Freddie's perfect, but he sure was unusual. You see it all. Not in a gratuitous way. It's not meant to be messy and licentious, and I think that was a good decision.

> **"It's all about Freddie. Yes, we are in there, but the story is about Freddie."**

But it's not a druggy rock movie?
No. It didn't need to be. All that stuff is in there. But you don't need to be revelling in scenes of debauchery. Not that Freddie was particularly debauched anyway. I know some people were looking for that. But no, it's a film which portrays the truth, in a fairly gritty and honest but also entertaining way.

Do you think Freddie would have approved of and liked the film?
I do. I think he would have felt it was a fair cop, really. It shows all his greatness and all his fallibility and insecurity – the whole bit. I think it shows him very truthfully and not sycophantically, but in a way that appreciates his talent. Because he was sure was unique. I've never met anybody like Freddie in my life, before or since, and it's probably not going to happen again.

Do you think Freddie could have been a good film star?
No. He didn't have the patience. He was offered a residency in the West End at one point, and he said: "Yeah, I'll do it. How many shows a week?" They said: 'Eight." And he said: "I'll do a couple." He didn't like repeating stuff. Patience was not one of Freddie's virtues. I think he would have found it difficult turning up every day on the set. I don't think that would have lasted long [laughs].

Which is your favourite scene in the film?
My favourite Rami moment is when Freddie is plucking up the courage to tell us he's going off to do his solo album. It's a wonderful piece of acting – and a lot of that wasn't in the script. And when I watch it I feel that is so Freddie. He'd talk quietly, puff on his cigarette, not want to come out with the words. Eventually he did it – in a very cut-and-dry manner. But you can see the angst inside. That scene nearly got cut from the movie – that's a little secret – just because there's always this pressure to make things shorter. But we fought for that scene to stay in, because the realism of it is quite gut-wrenching. That was a difficult moment for us. It's Freddie kinda leaving his family.

You've also updated your *Queen In 3-D* book with exclusive photos from the film set. What was it like being there?
Various different emotions, really. In the early days with [director] Bryan Singer, it was very taut and tense, and I didn't feel some of the time that I ought to be there – I felt like I was interfering in the process. But nevertheless I was, and I took the camera and captured some moments in the shooting. In the latter part, when Dexter Fletcher took over the direction, it was like a different universe, with everybody very jolly and relaxed. I think the movie benefits from both regimes; it has a very serious undercurrent, but also has some lightness, a lot of real joy and fun.

THIS SPREAD: BOHEMIAN RHAPSODY 2x STILLS COURTESY OF TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX

That's our boy: Malek with Brian May and Roger Taylor.

Doppelganger: May with Gwilym Lee, who plays him in the film.

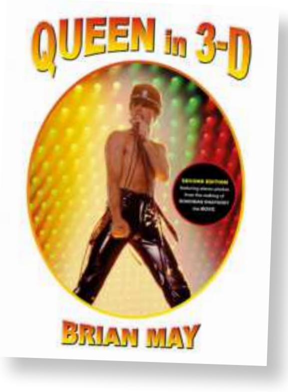
Champions of the world: Rami Malek won the 2019 Academy Award for Best Actor for his portrayal of Freddie in the film

Do you think the film will satisfy the hard-core Queen fans?
Yeah, I think it will. It satisfies us. It makes us feel something. There's a lot of incredible detail. All our technical people were involved, so if you look around at the guitars and amps you see on stage at Live Aid, you'll see they're pretty damn perfect and correct. And the guys who built the Live Aid set itself [for the film] were the guys who built the original. Of course, there'll always be things you can find fault with. There is no such thing as a perfect film, and Queen fans will understand when they see it that certain things have been moved around for the story to make sense. You can't collapse forty years of a person's life into two and a half hours without cutting out a lot of stuff.

I heard that even Roger Taylor's socks are period-correct.
I don't know about the socks. To be honest, not all of the clothes are exact reproductions by any means, but the significant details are pretty much there. Once the film was in motion, it was not our film any more, it was Fox's film. They were paying the bills. So we certainly didn't go into the studio and tell people what to do. If there was something which really rankled – something that was obviously not right – then we would say it very quietly to the director and let him sort it out.

Did you really play your Red Special guitar with a violin bow, like in the film trailer?
No. The funny thing is, the trailer people work from film stock which is their own. So a lot of what's in the trailers is not in the movie. The scene with me and the bow was shot as part of a bunch of experimental things. We weren't there for the shoot. And when I saw it I went: "No, that's not what happened. And don't let's even pretend it happened, ." But the trailer people liked it. That's all I can say. But no, you won't see that in the movie.

The soundtrack includes your unreleased Live Aid set, doesn't it?
Yeah. There's some good live stuff, some of which hasn't been on albums before. But also, there's some of the early stuff that wasn't recorded at the time. For instance, Freddie coming to see me and Roger play as Smile. That's all depicted in the movie. And we were able to recreate some of those bits of music, which was a lot of fun. Tim Staffell [Smile vocalist] actually came in and recorded it with us, so on the movie soundtrack album there's a Smile track [*Doing All Right*].



You've spent nearly 50 years in the music industry, but the film business is a different beast. Do you think you could you handle being part of the Hollywood machine in the longer-term, or would that life eventually give you a nervous breakdown?
Well, it's funny what you can adapt to. You can enjoy being a part of it for a while, but it's heavy-duty. The figures – in terms of money – are a hundred times bigger than what we deal with every day. It's a different world. And the amount of wastage is incredible. But a lot of wonderful things happen. And I think there's some magic in this film.

THIS SPREAD: © 4x PHOTOS FROM BRIAN MAY'S QUEEN IN 3-D COLLECTION

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QUEEN THE 50 BEST SONGS OF ALL TIME

WE ASKED QUEEN FANS EVERYWHERE TO VOTE FOR THE BAND'S GREATEST SONGS – AND YOU RESPONDED IN YOUR THOUSANDS. THIS IS WHAT YOU SAID.

50 Bicycle Race

Jazz, 1978

Freddie Mercury's nimble whip though this hard rock tongue-twister presents Queen at their most ludicrously camp. The song itself is a thrilling ride, with references to cocaine, *Star Wars*, Watergate and John Wayne, and a solo played on bicycle bells. Musically, it's a pretty good representation of the album that housed it: bonkers, scattershot, but above all, genius.

Having decamped to Switzerland to work on *Jazz*, this song's inspiration was found from the Tour de France 1978 passing through Montreux, the location of Queen's favoured Mountain Studios. The inspiration for the video, featuring dozens of naked women riding cycles around Wimbledon Stadium was equally clear, and predictably resulted in its being banned in a number of countries. Which, of course, is probably exactly what Queen wanted in the first place.

"That Queen record *Jazz* had some weird shit on it," Mike Patton told us in 2006. "If you listen to how dense *Bicycle Race* is, it sounds more dense, more deep, more rich than these ProTools systems that you can record 96 fucking tracks on. So that really impressed me – not to mention the music – but, how the fuck did they do it?"

49 The Fairy Feller's Master-Stroke

Queen II, 1974

Inspired by a Richard Dadd painting of the same name, this *Queen II* album track is a good example of how Mercury's natural creativity could be boosted by a bit of deft studio know-how. "I did a lot of research on it and it inspired me to write a song about the painting, depicting what I thought I saw in it," he told Radio One in 1977. "It was just because I'd come through art college and I basically like the artist and I like the painting, so I thought I'd like to write a song about it."

All sounds simple enough – though of course, Queen being Queen, it was anything but. Complex enough to stop it ever being performed live, the track comes to life with its layered instrumentals and whimsical tales of fairy expeditions. Dubbed by Mercury as Queen's "biggest studio experiment", its use of multi-tracked harpsichord, piano, castanets and Hendrix-inspired panning has seen it held up as a milestone in Mercury's songwriting career.

48 Dragon Attack

The Game, 1980

Allegedly John Deacon's favourite Queen song and begrudged by Roger Taylor for being "very hard on the right wrist", this *Another One Bites The Dust* B-side has become something of a cult favourite among Queen fans over the years. Written by Brian May, its minimalist disco-funk leanings are easier to understand when you learn it was the product of a drunken jam session which eventually made it onto tape.

"Roger and John swing convincingly, locking into an infectious groove that they adhere to throughout," writes Georg Purvis in *Queen: Complete Works*. "[This allows] Brian full rein on some dirty guitar licks while Freddie sings the minimal lyrics, long rumoured to be about his hard partying ways.

47 Liar

Queen, 1973

The second single to be released from Queen's self-titled debut, this song served as a superbly dramatic vehicle for Queen's harmony vocals, Brian May's guitar and the band's ability to tell stories with their music. This may have been Queen taking baby steps, but the sound of their future is all here: silks, satins, elaborate feathercuts, cod-Zeppelin riffs, wannabe Beach Boys harmonies and a mad gospel breakdown.

"The first song I heard was *Liar*," Paul Stanley told us of this song. "You only get one chance to make a first impression, and that was the song that made it for me. Obviously, they grew into something very different, but I remember hearing that song, and as far as the personality and the sonics of it, it was very impressive to me. Later on, it became something else which was equally impressive for other reasons – the diversity and the ability of everybody in that band to write a No.1 song is unmatched."

46 The Millionaire Waltz

A Day At The Races, 1976

This camp and quirky slice of whimsy from the pen of Mr Mercury is light-hearted as hell, but proof of the band's in-depth talent. Queen's taste for the overblown is given space to luxuriate here, the pointed grandeur of this song leading Taylor to crown it a spiritual successor to *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

A waltz that revels in the protagonist's high life and riches, this song was actually written about their then manager John Reid, with Mercury telling comedian and DJ Kenny Everett: "It's very out of the Queen format, really, and we thought we'd like to do that on every album. I think I went a bit mad on this one. But it's turned out alright I think, it makes people laugh sometimes."

45 Now I'm Here

Sheer Heart Attack, 1974

After a first major hit with a pop song, *Killer Queen*, the follow-up single was a reaffirmation of the band's heavy rock credentials. *Now I'm Here* was built around one of Brian May's greatest riffs, and for such a kick-ass song, it was a surprisingly big hit, reaching Number 11 on the UK chart.

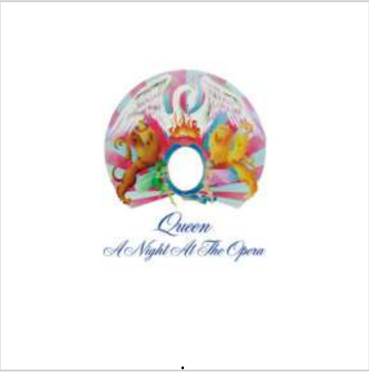
Written by May while he was laid up in hospital after returning from America – understandably keen to rejoin his bandmates who

GETTY

Queen: receiving a gold disc for their debut album.

had started work on their next album without him – work began on this track while May was convalescing. Lyrically, it reflected the disconnect between touring the US with Mott The Hoople and his living in a pokey bedsit in West London with his girlfriend. "It came out quite easily," said the guitarist. "Where I'd been wrestling with it before without getting anywhere."

The raucous hard rock of *Now I'm Here* made it a great live favourite. "It's a song that I think they opened with when I saw them circa the *Sheer Heart Attack* album," Porcupine Tree's Richard Barbieri told us. "Although Freddie camped it up, and much of their material was delicate, when Queen rocked out they easily rivalled Zeppelin, Sabbath and Purple. It was one of the best gigs I've ever seen."



44 I'm In Love With My Car

A Night At The Opera, 1975

Roger Taylor didn't have his own hit song until *Radio Ga Ga* in 1984, but he certainly made a few quid out of the one he wrote for *A Night At The Opera*. Famously, when *Bohemian Rhapsody* was released as a single, *I'm In Love With My Car* was the B-side, earning Taylor an equal split of the royalties with Mercury: the source of some friction between the two.

For all that, *I'm In Love With My Car* was a great song in its own right. It was inspired by a Queen roadie who considered his Triumph sports car the love of his life, hence the note in the album credits: 'Dedicated to Jonathan Harris, boy racer to the end.' Taylor's lyrics included much joking on this theme: *'Told my girl I had to forget her/Rather buy me a new carburettor.'*

Indeed, Brian May had dismissed the song as a joke when Taylor first played a demo for him. But the finished article was so good – a supercharged rock'n'roll number, played the way only Queen could, with Taylor the star of the show – that *I'm In Love With My Car* turned into a genuine Queen anthem.

43 Teo Torriatte (Let Us Cling Together)

A Day At The Races, 1976

A Day At The Races' piano-driven finale, this track was written by May as a gesture towards the band's dedicated Japanese fanbase. Having been warmly welcomed during their first visit to the country, May called the song "The result of feeling 'untimely ripped' from our lovely Japanese fans. I had never experienced anything like the love that was showered upon us when we were a young rock group in Japan. So suddenly, I felt I wanted to say on behalf of Queen that I missed them and we would not forget".

With the lyrics translated by Chika Kujiraoka, Mercury's sweetly evocative vocals made this a treasured fan favourite all over the globe.

May, Deacon, Taylor and Mercury pick up gold discs for *Crazy Little Thing Called Love*.

GETTY

42 Stone Cold Crazy

Sheer Heart Attack, 1974

The furious *Stone Cold Crazy* – an influence on the future members of Metallica, and hence a cornerstone of the thrash metal movement – is as close to true heavy metal as Queen ever came.

While Mercury's vocal on the 1974 original (the only Queen song credited to the whole band until the late 80s) was rather more playful and camp than Hetfield's, that ripping machine-gun riff and speedy headbanging tempo still mark this out as an early metal classic.

"Man, what a chorus," said Whitesnake's Reb Beach of the track. "I love that song because the whole band rocks, then everything stops and Freddie uses that amazing voice of his to express a really wordy verse. Only he could have made that sound the way it did."

41 I Was Born To Love You

Made In Heaven, 1995

Originally a Freddie Mercury solo track recorded during one of Queen's creative hiatuses, his disco-tastic version was given the rock treatment by May, Deacon and Taylor on Queen's final album, completed and released following Mercury's death.

Its disco origins mean it remains one of Queen's poppiest tracks, and its place as one of Queen's enduring favourites is perhaps made all the more curious when you learn Mercury considered it so throwaway that he nearly junked it from his genre-bending solo album *Mr Bad Guy* before it was released. Still, its heartfelt lyric and irresistible beat has made it a treasured fan favourite.

40 It's A Hard Life

The Works, 1984

This *The Works* single was written in every sense by Freddie Mercury, who not only played piano, and did most of the vocals, but even told May how to play his solo.

If you watch the tongue-in-cheek video for this song, the third single released from the album, it has an undeniably operatic feel, thanks in no small part to the intro being based on *Vesti La Giubba*, from the 19th Century opera *Pagliacci*. This is precisely why so many people saw this deliciously flamboyant, ceremonious performance as reprising *Bohemian Rhapsody*.

However, not everyone enjoyed the song or its video: "It's obvious that Roger and John are miserable throughout the video, scowling and grumbling to each other," writes Georg Purvis. Still, Mercury was proud of the end result, its pomp and grandeur making it one of his *The Works* favourites.

39 White Queen (As It Began)

Queen II, 1974

Purportedly inspired by British poet Robert Graves' *The White Goddess*, May later admitted it was really about a girl he'd fancied at school: "I remember being totally in love with this girl from biology, and I never ever talked to her… I [was] dared to ask out this girl, and she became a lifelong friend, it's very strange."

Still, his mix of acoustic guitar, thumping proto-metal and woozy instrumentation, blended with Mercury's silky vocals, gives the whole song a depth and density which pointed towards the brilliant power of May and Mercury's developing songwriting partnership.

38 Death On Two Legs (Dedicated To...)

A Night At The Opera, 1975

Truly the biggest 'fuck you' ever committed to tape, this ferocious takedown was inspired by the band's former management company, of whom Freddie once famously pouted: "One leaves them behind like one leaves excreta." Pure venom and bile, Mercury makes no attempt at sugarcoating how he feels about his subject matter: *'Feel good? Are you satisfied? You're a sewer rat decaying in a cesspool of pride/Should be made unemployed, then make yourself null and void.'* Ouch.

"The first Queen song that really turned me on was *Death On Two Legs*," Todd Rundgren told us. "It has everything that became 'signature Queen elements' – the big stacked up vocals, the fiery guitar thing. But it also has a bit of production pizzazz, and a very quirky arrangement, with a lot of stops and starts and syncopated hits in it. That was what made it arresting. I bought the album because of that song."

37 Breakthru

The Miracle, 1989

At the time this single was released, Mercury had been diagnosed with Aids, although this remained a closely guarded secret within Queen's inner circle. "I expect [critics] to say we're an arrogant bunch of bastards like they usually do," said May upon its release. "*The Miracle* isn't supposed to be us, it's supposed to be something that we're looking for – peace on Earth – and that will be lambasted as crass idealism. But there you go."

The critics could say what they liked – the fans loved it. Starting off with a delicate piano intro, the song soon gives way to a rollicking, upbeat rocker. Also, listen out for that *Boys Of Summer*-inspired chord sequence. "I very much like this track," said May at the time. "It's a Roger track, full of energy."

36 Keep Yourself Alive

Queen, 1973

Disregarding an oddity disc made as Larry Lurex, *Keep Yourself Alive* was Freddie Mercury's first single. Incredibly, it was slated by *Record Mirror* for 'lacking originality'. Huh? With its innovative tape phasing and *Pinball Wizard*-inspired studio trickery, it was anything but. Its galloping riffs, banks of multi-tracked guitars, call-and-response vocals and killer chorus also made it a firm live favourite.

It's also a majestic example of May's studio perfectionism, proving that the band had a heightened sense of grandiosity from the off. May was harder to please though, regretting later that "it never had that magic that it should've had."

"Freddie Mercury was the Van Gogh of rock; everything he did was great" Survivor's Frankie Sullivan told us. "Can you think of anything that was bad? I cut my teeth trying to play Brian May's licks on this song. It still gives me goose bumps."

35 Brighton Rock

Sheer Heart Attack, 1974

Sheer Heart Attack opener *Brighton Rock* (working titles: *Bognor Ballad, Southend Sea Scout* and *Happy Little Fuck*) was bookended by a picaresque tale of two seaside lovers sung in high and low registers by Mercury.

With its fairground noises, choppy guitar riff, helium-tinged vocals, May eventually adopted *Brighton Rock* as his guitar showcase. "I'd gotten away from listening to Hendrix quite a bit by then," he told the BBC in 1984. "I'd like to think that that was more sort of developing my style, really. Particularly the solo bit in the middle, which I'd been doing on the Mott The Hoople tour and sort of gradually expanded and has got more and more ever since. Although I keep trying to throw it out, it keeps creeping back in."

"It was the first thing I heard them play," Nazareth's Pete Agnew told us. "Roy Thomas Baker had produced our second album, and told us to look out for Queen. When I got home I went to Boots in the local high street and bought a cassette of *Sheer Heart Attack*. After sitting in the car and playing both sides I was stunned, and had to be moved on by a traffic warden."

34 You Take My Breath Away

A Day At The Races, 1976

Another song on this list to have been inspired by Queen's first trip to Japan, this one drew upon the Japanese Pentatonic scale for its melody. Written with Mercury's then-partner David Minns in mind, it's a delicate, plaintive piano-driven love song in the most classically Queen sense, and one that doesn't hold back in letting the protagonist know exactly how into him Mercury really was.

"It did literally take my breath away when I first heard it," said The Struts' Luke Spiller. "The opening sequence, the vocal stacking, the notes Freddie hit. I remember specifically learning how to go into my falsetto range from that song – it showed me things I could do with my voice that I didn't know I could do."

33 Seven Seas Of Rhye

Queen II, 1974

Oh, we do like to be beside the seaside. Previewed instrumentally on their debut a year earlier, this 'finished' version of the song admirably worked itself up into a fizzing, piano-led froth, complete with seaside singalong finale. Stuffed with gleeful energy and bursting with innovative ideas, it was one of Mercury's favourites, despite the scathing reviews Queen had already grown to expect.

"For me, the song that really set up Queen's career was *Seven Seas Of Rhye*," Magnum's Tony Clarkin told us. "A real rocker with fantastic harmonies. I loved the fact that it was on their first album, Queen, and was reprised at the end of *Queen II*. That was a stroke of genius."

All that *Jazz*: Queen circa 1978.

GETTY

The song demonstrates the band's ability to play within any style, and even though the song construction is fairly obvious, the middle eight, composed of electronica and studio trickery, shows off the humour inherent throughout the band's output and often overlooked. Oh, and your ears aren't deceiving you; the final lyric is indeed *'fried chicken'*, motivated by the band's gnawing hunger after a long day in the studio and the result of some Mercury-led vamping during the recording process.

30 A Kind Of Magic

A Kind Of Magic, 1986

A sister to *One Vision, A Kind Of Magic* was another high quality pop song written by Roger about his utopian vision of the world. One of Queen's most recognisable singles, this again was initially written for the film *Highlander*.

The title was inspired by a line from the film and moulded into a hook-laden pop masterpiece with the band's customary aplomb, although there are two versions offering slightly differing constructions and feels in the public domain. The first, credited to Roger Taylor, appears over the closing credits of the film, while the slightly funkier album version bears the Mercury hallmark, although both are driven by Taylor's unashamedly poptastic drum sound. We prefer the latter, personally.

32 Princes Of The Universe

A Kind Of Magic, 1986

Recorded as part of the *Highlander* soundtrack, this song has many of the glossy 80s movie score calling cards you might expect, but with all the stomping, overtly theatrical Queen pomp you might not. No strangers to soundtracks, of course – though it's worth noting not a single song from *Flash Gordon* made it into this list – Queen knew how to deliver what a movie demanded, and this song, with it's hard-edged metallic riffs and creeping sense of unease, is one of the heaviest the band produced in the 80s. At a time when the band were utterly preoccupied with twinkly piano numbers and radio-friendly pop rock, it was a glorious reminder that the band still knew how to rock. Hard.

31 One Vision

A Kind Of Magic, 1986

Featured in the film *Iron Eagle, One Vision* saw Roger Taylor calling for worldwide peace and unity. The mother of all set openers, *One Vision* launched the part-*Highlander* soundtrack, part-Queen album that was *A Kind Of Magic*, and was the first single to be released with a 'written by Queen' credit. Inspired by their epoch-defining Live Aid performance, the tune is built around a suitably girthsome guitar riff and fleshed out by yet another brilliant vocal performance.

29 Too Much Love Will Kill You

Made In Heaven, 1995

Having originally been written by May sometime between *A Kind Of Magic* and *The Miracle*, this song never made it onto their 1989 album and was largely consigned to history until it popped up again on Queen's final album. Mixed using a version for which Mercury had recorded vocals in 1989, this is the only song on *MIH* which uses an original version, rather than one re-worked by the band.

Written about May's marital troubles and his blossoming feelings for Anita Dobson, the song won Queen an Ivor Novello in 1997, with May saying: "If there was ever a song for which I would have wanted to 'win a prize for', this would have been the one. Perhaps there are two kinds of song – some songs happen, simply because somebody sits down and decides to write a song. But there is another kind, like this one, which has to be written, because the writer has no choice. This happened at a time when I was going through a very difficult period; it was written as a kind of therapy."

28 Tie Your Mother Down

A Day At The Races, 1976

Its surging riff influenced by Rory Gallagher, Brian expected Freddie to change the song's working title. He didn't.

A stalwart of the Queen setlist, those used to the frenetic pace of live adaptations will be pleasantly surprised by the far groovier album version, opening the record after an almost unbearably tense build-up. Trivia tells us that, during the video shoot, Taylor was blown off his stool by some inadvisably-placed pyrotechnics and, coincidentally, the American and Japanese editions of the song as a single were backed by what is arguably the worst Queen song ever; *Drowse*…

"It's a song that I wish Def Leppard had written," Joe Elliott told us of the song. "It's got the drums and guitars just the way we like them. It's hard to choose between that one and *Now I'm Here*, but I'll go with *Tie Your Mother Down* as my favourite Queen song just for its thrashiness – by their standards it's pretty rough and ready."

27 Save Me

The Game, 1980

The first single from *The Game*, this power ballad is heroic stuff – written by Brian May, who also played piano, sung with gusto by Freddie Mercury, with a wonderfully OTT solo by May. A classic Queen ballad – the video was something a little different, though, and featured some very bleak, distinctive chalk drawings.

This single came out six months before *The Game* was released. It reached No.11 in the charts, staying there for an amazing six months. In many respects, it's a typical Queen single, with an over-the-top production [from longtime producer Reinhold Mack] that had more in common with the early days than the late 1970s releases.

26 39

A Night At The Opera, 1975

Another 70s B-side here, this time for *You're My Best Friend* – but more on that track later. Inspired by a science fiction tale of space exploration and time dilation, Brian May's acoustic-based 39 remains among Queen's most oddly endearing moments, and is one of few lead May vocals in the Queen catalogue.

"It's always been my favourite song, The Darkness' Dan Hawkins told us. "My dad used to have this old, beaten-up MG, but it had a really nice stereo and I vividly remember him putting in his cassette of *A Night At The Opera*. It was already at the song 39, the harmonies and arrangement of which promptly blew my mind. After that I was obsessed with music and Queen."

25 It's Late

News Of The World, 1977

Another song from the pen of May, like many of his best songs, this was inspired by troubles in his love life. An admission of his struggles with fidelity and the resulting guilt while out on the road – thinly veiled as a three-act Greek tragedy – the meaty, bluesy riff, salacious subject matter and layered vocals make it one of Queen's most tantalising tracks.

"It's another one of those story of your life songs," May said in 1989. "I think it's about all sorts of experiences that I had, and experiences that I thought other people had, but I guess it was very personal, and it's written in three parts; it's like the first part of the story is at home, the guy is with his woman. The second part is in a room somewhere, the guy is with some other woman that he loves and can't help loving, and the last part is he's back with his woman."

24 Crazy Little Thing Called Love

The Game, 1980

This rockabilly 50s pastiche was reportedly written by Freddie Mercury while covered in bubble bath foam at the Munich Hilton. Queen proved once again that musical boundaries weren't a problem for them with the release of *Crazy*…. What's more, the theme allowed Mercury to dress up in leather and writhe about on the back of a huge motorcycle for the accompanying video.

Musically, the song is one of the band's simpler moments, with a straightforward construction, acoustic intro and obligatory solo bass run. The musical versatility also extends to the guitar solo, with May dusting off Taylor's own Fender Esquire to produce a perfect 50s-flavoured lead break.

23 Good Old-Fashioned Lover Boy

A Day At The Races, 1976

A music-hall inspired slice of rampantly tongue-in-cheek romance, this *Teo Torriatte* B-side documents the protagonist's excitement at getting ready for a night on the town with the object of his desire. The lilting verses bob along to Mercury's piano and Deacon's bass, while 70s Queen's trademark layered harmonies carry the chorus.

Light hearted and a good bit of fun, Mercury described this song as "One of my vaudeville numbers. I always do a vaudeville track, though …*Lover Boy* is more straightforward than *Seaside Rendezvous*, for example. It's quite simple, piano and vocals with a catchy beat; the album needs it to sort of ease off."

22 You're My Best Friend

A Night At The Opera, 1975

A truly romantic declaration written by John Deacon about the woman he'd marry, the less romantically-minded among us could also, perhaps, view this 1976 single as a sentimental conversation between two old pals at pub throwing out time. The first song to establish Deacon as a decent songwriter in his own right, with a passionate vocal turn from Mercury, the song is stuffed with amazing three and four part vocal and guitar harmonies. While Mercury's performance might be jazzed up to the nines with special effects, it still does a good job of carrying Deacon's heartfelt message.

"I'm very pleased with that, actually," Mercury told *Rock Australia* magazine of the song in 1976. "John has really come into his own. Brian and myself have mostly written all the songs before, and he's been in the background; he's worked very hard, and his song's very good, isn't it? It's nice."

21 These Are The Days Of Our Lives

Innuendo, 1991

His health worsening by the day, Freddie was able to throw himself into Roger Taylor's heart-wrenching lyric of a man looking back on all he's achieved. The result was an incredibly poignant song with thinly veiled parallel's to Mercury's own life. The song's video, filmed in May 1991, marks the last time Mercury appeared on film, making this single something of a spiritual full stop on Queen's recording career, and was issued as a double A-side with the re-release of *Bohemian Rhapsody* in December 1991. A fitting send-off for Mercury, who had died the previous month.

"He sang about not being able to turn back the clock and laying back and enjoying life through your kids, when of course he knew he was going to die," Slade's Dave Hill told us of the song. "He was well aware of what he was going through. Those were the days of his life, and his songs are still a big part of ours. It's a very reflective time when somebody dies, but Queen's music has kept Freddie alive in spirit."

20 Spread Your Wings

News Of The World, 1977

Another number from the pen of John Deacon, this 1978 single charted poorly upon release (reaching a mere 34 in the UK charts) but as its placing here indicates, has become a firm fan favourite in the 40 years since it made its debut. Following the story of a troubled youth stuck in a dead end job, the narrator urges the young man to spread his wings and fly away, to a soundtrack of twinkly keys and acoustic guitar before the song's stomping chorus kicks in.

"I liked a lot of John's songs," ex-Queen roadie Peter Hince told us. "The big ones, of course, are *Another One Bites The Dust* and *I Want To Break Free*. In the end, though, I think *Spread Your Wings* is John's best song. I never cared that much for the power ballads – those songs with really big dynamics, going from something like a lullaby into these huge crescendos. But there was something different about *Spread Your Wings*. It was like a power ballad, but it had more emotion in it."

19 I Want It All

The Miracle, 1989

The Miracle's lead single, *I Want It All* had rock fans the world over breathing a sigh of relief. A hard-edged, stomping rocker stuffed full with squealing solos and hefty riffs, it reprised the band's classic rock-focussed sound, albeit with a distinctly late 80s gloss.

"I Want It All re-establishes our old image in a way," chief writer May said of the track in 1989. "It's nice to come back with something strong. Something that reminds people we're a live group."
On the surface written about a group of disillusioned youths longing for a better life, May admitted it was actually inspired by a source closer to home: "It was just this riff that I was obsessed with for months. The actual title was a favourite phrase of Anita's, a very ambitious girl: '*I want it all, and I want it now*.'"

18 The Prophet's Song

A Night At The Opera, 1975

Just about as close to true prog as Queen ever got, this eight minute May-written epic was originally conceived in four parts, which goes some way to explaining its scattershot voyage. It moves from delicate acoustic guitar strums and plucked strings to heavy, rocking arpeggiated riffs and layered vocal harmonies, then to its two-and-a-half minute *a cappella* interlude around the 3:25 mark, and then back into a guitar solo-laden hard rock wig out, before a 30 second reprise of that delicate acoustic guitar. Phew. It's an exhaustive profile of everything Queen did best, full of trademark prowess and ambition. It's little wonder it's one of Mike Portnoy's favourite Queen songs.

"I had a dream about what seemed like revenge on people," explained May of the song. "I couldn't really work out in the dream what it was that people had done wrong. It was something like a flood. In the dream, people were walking on the streets trying to touch each other's hands, desperate to try to make some sign that they were caring about other people. I felt that the trouble must be – and this is one of my obsessions anyway – that people don't make enough contact with each other."

17 Hammer To Fall

The Works, 1984

Still depressingly prescient today, this *The Works* track was written by May as a response to the world's war-minded, trigger-happy leaders and the grinding futility of conflict. A rousing rocker inspired by Samuel Beckett's 1953 play *Waiting For*

Queen perform *Killer Queen* on Dutch TV in November 1974.

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Godot, the lyrics play upon many of the fears felt by those living in the shadow of the Cold War and the threat of nuclear action from the USSR (that hammer that's falling? Think back to the Soviet's hammer and sickle insignia and it all falls into place).

Almost tailor-made for the live arena, it's little wonder this track was one of the highlights of Queen's show-stealing performance at Live Aid in 1985.

16 Another One Bites The Dust

The Game, 1980

Another One Bites The Dust topped the US 'black' chart and allegedly contains backwards-masked messages which may or may not tell listeners that *'It's fun to smoke marijuana'*. A dirty take on disco-funk, its simple and compact vocal runs in tandem with Deacon's bass and May's tight, jagged riffs. Combined with a simple, driving drum beat that barely has a single fill, it's simplicity in its purest, most effective form. Believe it or not, it was actually Deacon who wrote this song and introduced the band to funk in the process.

"I'd listened to a lot of soul music when I was in school, and I've always been interested in that sort of music," said Deacon upon the song's release. "I'd been wanting to do a track like [this] for a while, but originally all I had was the line and the bass riff. Gradually, I filled it in and the band added ideas. I could hear it as a song for dancing but had no idea it would become as big as it did."

15 We Will Rock You

News Of The World, 1977

An innocent coincidence, perhaps, but the fact that the song used the pronoun 'We' in this *News Of The World* single said a great deal about how the band saw themselves in terms of their own loyal fan base, and the slings and arrows they had suffered on their behalf.

Hoping to get back to their roots and peel back some of the layers of over-production that had plagued criticism of their most recent albums, *WWRY* was engineered to show the band's more "spontaneous side", and is a real statement of a song packed into two minutes as a result. With its captivating 'boom-boom-tush' rhythm and whiplash vocals, topped off by that marvellously bugling guitar solo, it was the first real rock anthem to gain traction since the heyday of what we now think of as classic rock. Populist, all-inclusive, this was the 'come on in, the water's fine' rock anthem at its most affecting. A song for the people to sing along to; to clap their hands and stamp their feet to.

Incidentally, this song has no actual recorded drums. Its memorable beat was derived purely from studio handclaps and foot-stomps. The fast version is well worth a listen, too.

14 Fat Bottomed Girls

Jazz, 1978

Having only really flirted with the idea of sex in their music up until this point – though as Brian May pointed out, "in our music, sex is either implied or referred to semi-jokingly, but it's always there" – Queen went all out in this lead single from *Jazz*, in which Brian May conjures up a riff every bit as seductive and awe-inspiring as the song's tongue-in-cheek, risqué subject matter.

A rallying cry for the appreciation of chubby cheeked women across the land, the bluesy guitar riff calls upon the likes of the Rolling Stones' *Honky Tonk Women* set against a jangly, southern-fried soundtrack.

"I wrote it with Fred in mind," said May in 2008. "As you do, especially when you've got a singer who likes fat bottomed girls… or boys."

13 The March Of The Black Queen

Queen II, 1974

Another of Mercury's proggier numbers, *The March Of The Black Queen* channels his love for bombastic storytelling to its fullest, clocking in at way over six minutes and documenting another flamboyant tale of fairy expeditions – a consistent theme on his side of *Queen II*. This is one of the two Queen songs written with polyrhythm/polymeter – the other being *Bohemian Rhapsody* – leading to many fans to crown it *BH*'s precursor, especially thanks to that ever-so-similar outro at 5:40. It's become a firm fan favourite as a result.

Much like many of the songs on *Queen II*, its mind-bogglingly complex structure kept it from being performed live. It was also a key example of the band's lack of self-restraint when it came to over-production in the early days: "Those were the days of the 16-track studios," said Mercury in 1977. "Before, when we did so many overdubs on 16 track, it was like we just kept piling it on and on. The tape went transparent because it couldn't take anymore. I think it snapped in two places, as well."

Champions: Mercury and May give it some on stage.

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12 We Are The Champions

News Of The World, 1977

If ever there was a song about beating insurmountable odds, look no further than *We Are The Champions*, Mercury's national anthem to underdogs making good.

The 'We' in *We Are The Champions* was again meant as a collective 'you and me' salute to fans – an in it together banner call, but with more subtle, reflective intentions. With its lines about having '*paid my dues*' and '*done my sentence, but committed no crime*' Mercury both invites us in to share his lonely bubble, and speaks up for us with his defiant declaration that '*we*' are the champions, '*my friends*'. Heart pounding, arms-aloft salutes, seated at the piano, head thrown back like Judy Garland, Freddie would be both martyr to the cause and friend-indeed.

"I can understand some people saying *We Are The Champions* was bombastic," allowed May some years later. "But it wasn't saying Queen are the champions, it was saying all of us are. It made the concert like a football match, but with everyone on the same side."

Or as Freddie put it laughingly in an interview with the *Daily Mail* in the aftermath of the song's gigantic success: "To some people I'm still a bitch. I enjoy being a bitch. I enjoy being surrounded by bitches. I certainly don't go looking for the most perfect people. I'd find that boring. I'm like a mad dog about town. I like to enjoy life."

11 Radio Ga Ga

The Works, 1984

Written by Roger Taylor after overhearing his three-year-old son saying "radio poo-poo", this ultra-rhythmic anthem topped the charts in 19 different countries. Among the huge amounts of good Bob Geldof's first Live Aid did, one was to bring Queen back from the brink and reinvigorate them as a creative force. "Live Aid proved a great tonic for us." Taylor said in an interview in *The Sun* six months later. "Now we can't wait to hit the stage again."

The reason for this effect on the band was, stripped of all their usual live paraphernalia and reduced to just the four of them on stage, Mercury owned Wembley from the moment he stepped on the stage. The set ran like a greatest hits outing and the sight of 72,000 pairs of hands raised aloft during *Radio Ga Ga* remains the single most enduring image of that day.

10 I Want To Break Free

The Works, 1984

Can anyone ever forget the sight of Roger Taylor as a schoolgirl – or a moustachioed Freddie Mercury vacuuming in full drag – in the remarkable David Mallett-produced video for this hit number three single? We think probably not. The video cost an estimated £100,000 to make and had all the ingredients of a mundane kitchen sink drama, yet it quickly became one of the band's most iconic promos. The crashing bores over at MTV took exception to the clip – probably the dressing in drag – and banned it from being shown in North America. Which, of course, did nothing to hamper its success in the slightest.

But it wasn't just the video which made it such a brilliant single. Written by John Deacon, its simple rhythm, synth-led intro and soaring guitars were the perfect foil for the song's barbed lyrics about escaping domestic mundanity and Mercury's razor-sharp vocal performance. "John didn't write many songs, but most of them sure counted," said May of the song in 2003.

9 Innuendo

Innuendo, 1991

Written by Roger Taylor, the dark and complex *Innuendo* has been called the *Bohemian Rhapsody* of the 90s. The title track of the last album released in Mercury's lifetime – which had a guest appearance from Steve Howe, who dubbed it "heavy metal flamenco" – began as a jam, before being opened up into a flowing track that incorporated some fantastically synthesised orchestrations. Plus there's the brilliant, arresting lyrics: '*Surrender your ego; be free, be free.*'

Knowing that time was running out on their life as a recording band, the four members grouped together with the intention of creating something that rivalled the power of their most popular albums when they turned their attentions to *Innuendo*. Sure, the track may have seemed like a risk, but the band had little left to lose. "It's got the bolero-type rhythm," said May in 1991. "That's going to be the first single here. It's a bit of a risk, but it's different, and you either win it all or you lose it all. It had a nice sound and feel, and we stuck with that."

The risk payed off. Despite mixed reviews – which Queen were well used to by now – it stormed into the Number One spot in the charts.

8 Under Pressure

Hot Space, 1982

Recorded with David Bowie, Roger Taylor is right to call this song "one of the very best things Queen have done".

The first time Queen collaborated with another artist they got their second UK Number One. Both Queen and David Bowie happened to be in Montreux in October 1981 and according to Swiss promoter Claude Nobs: "We had a big barbecue at my house with wine and the weather was beautiful and at midnight I said to them: 'Why don't you go to the studio and do something?'. They looked at me and said: 'What do you mean?' And I said: 'You don't always have Queen and David Bowie together so why don't you go into the studio and see what you can do?'."

By next morning they'd recorded the song. It's underpinned by one of the finest bass lines in pop history from John Deacon, but most of the arrangements were done by Mercury whose soaring vocals, while a perfect complement to Bowie's, steal the show spectacularly. Bowie apparently wanted to re-record it all, but Queen's sense of spontaneity prevailed.

7 Killer Queen

Sheer Heart Attack, 1974

"You almost expect Noel Coward to sing it," said Freddie of Queen's ode to a high-class call girl. "It's one of those bowler hat, black suspender belt numbers." Hitting No.2 in the UK in late 1974, *Killer Queen* was the band's big breakthrough. It also announced Freddie Mercury as a singular talent, a pop-rock song so perfectly poised, with an evocative lyric full of classic lines: '*Gunpowder, gelatine/Dynamite with a laser beam/Guaranteed to blow your mind.*' Also in *Killer Queen* is arguably the greatest Brian May solo of all time.

Many have claimed to be the inspiration behind *Killer Queen*, most notably Eric 'Monster! Monster!' Hall, the future football agent who then worked as Queen's radio plugger. According to Mercury, the title character was pure fantasy.

"No, I'd never really met a woman like that," he explained after the album's release. "I can dream up all kinds of things. That's the kind of world I live in. It's very flamboyant."

6 Who Wants To Live Forever

A Kind Of Magic, 1986

Brian May's eloquently expressed rebuttal of the need for eternal life appeared in the *Highlander* movie, and assumed a new and unwelcome tone on November 24, 1991. While May sings the first verse of the album version, Mercury's soaring vocals fill the rest of the track, providing an infinitely poignant listen and securing the song's place both as a fan favourite and the UK's fifth most likely song to be played at a funeral. To add to the song's pomp and melancholy grandeur, Queen were backed up by the National Philharmonic Orchestra.

"I love *Who Wants To Live Forever* simply because of the beautiful vocal melody, the way it continues to lift and lift as the song progresses," Iron Maiden's Bruce Dickinson told us. "The first time I heard this song, it made me cry."

5 Love Of My Life

A Night At The Opera, 1975

A highly emotional staple of the band's live shows past and present, Brian May plays harp on one lover's plea to another not to walk away and desert them, reputedly written by Mercury for his soon-to-be-ex-girlfriend Mary Austin.

One of Queen's most gorgeous, affecting numbers, the power of this this romantic ballad makes most sense when placed in the context of its live setting. Best served with an audience of thousands singing along, it says much about the band's embarrassment of riches – and their propensity for the vaguely obtuse – that it was dropped from the set in the mid-80s despite becoming a treasured audience singalong at shows in the late 70s.

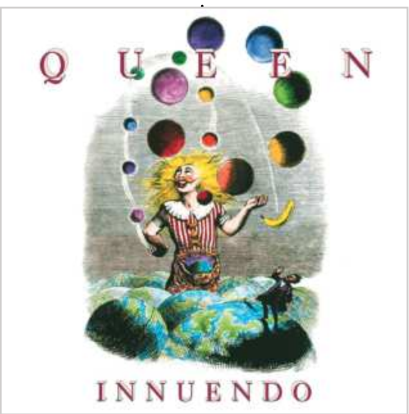
It soon made it back into the set, though, and is now best known and best loved for being the live Queen song – making the *Live Killers* cut the definitive version.

4 The Show Must Go On

Innuendo, 1991

Essentially Freddie's farewell, with May offering a measured solo and a suitably dramatic arrangement, *The Show Must Go On* was written as an enduring testimony to Mercury's relentless drive. He delivers a grandstanding performance, despite May's reservations about whether the frontman's rapidly ailing health would allow him to even sing it. Downing a stiff vodka, Mercury assured him: "I'll fucking do it, darling".

"*The Show Must Go On* came from Roger and John playing the sequence, and I started to put things down," May said in 1994. "At the beginning, it was just this chord sequence, but I had this strange feeling that it could be somehow important, and I got very impassioned and went and beavered away at it. I sat down with Freddie, and we decided what the theme should be and wrote the first verse. It's a long story, that song, but I always felt it would be important because we were dealing with things that were hard to talk about at the time, but in the world of music, you could do it."



"To me, the most autobiographical line was: '*My make-up may be flaking but my smile still stays on*,'" said Mercury's longterm partner Jim Hutton. "That was true. No matter how ill Freddie felt, he never grumbled to anyone or sought sympathy of any kind. It was his battle, no one else's, and he always wore a brave face against the ever-increasing odds against him."

3 Somebody To Love

A Day At The Races, 1976

The most beautiful song that Freddie Mercury ever wrote was inspired by the late Queen of Soul, Aretha Franklin, and influenced by American gospel music. The vocal arrangements are stunning, with the multi-tracked voices of Mercury, May and Taylor recreating the sound of a gospel choir.

Mercury in particular dug deep in his lead vocal, the most soulful performance he ever recorded. Its thunderous vocal harmonies polished to perfection, *Somebody To Love* builds magnificently and offers unusual lyrical confessions of loneliness and insecurity.

"Freddie always said that *Somebody To Love* was better than *Bohemian Rhapsody* – a better piece of songwriting," Peter Hince told us. "He felt that this was his best-structured song. The studio version is really good, but the live version was something else. They took it to a different level. It had real power and guts on stage. And whenever *Somebody To Love* was in the set, it just seemed to be a better show. It had something that lifted the whole band. It's a very special song."

2 Don't Stop Me Now

Jazz, 1978

The second single to be released from *Jazz, DSMN* was a joyously delivered summation of Mercury's life manifesto; fun, fun and more fun. A pumping, piano-driven rocker, it's difficult to believe now that it charted poorly upon its release, making it to number nine in the UK but only Number 86 in the US. Not that it harmed its success or longevity a jot – it's been a staple of wedding, birthday and Bar Mitzvah playlists ever since.

There's been speculation since its release that the song was an expression of Mercury embracing his sexuality head-on, unapologetically celebrating his newfound status as part of the furniture in the UK's gay club scene.

The change of direction this song marked in Mercury's songwriting – and lifestyle – wasn't met with as much enthusiasm from the rest of the band. "It's very much Freddie's pop side," Brian May told Georg Purvis of the song. "And I remember thinking, 'I'm not quite sure if this is what we should be doing.' I think there was also a feeling that lyrically it represented something that was happening to Freddie which we kind of thought was threatening him, and probably it was in a sense. But having said that, it's full of joy and optimism."

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"It never fails to improve my mood," Diamond Head's Brian Tatler told us "'I'm having such a good time, I'm having a ball', sings Mr Fahrenheit himself, and you know what? I totally believe him. The song keeps on climaxing until it finally lets out its last gasp of perfect harmony, Freddie's ad-libbed vocals drifting happily away into the night, just like a cigarette after sex."

1 Bohemian Rhapsody

A Night At The Opera, 1975

Really, could the Number One spot here ever really have gone to anything else? When doubt regarding airplay of Mercury's celebrated 'mock opera' was aired, Freddie rightly retorted: "Of course they'll play it, my dear. It's going to be fucking huge."

He was right, of course. It seems perverse now that anyone could ever have doubted the song's world-conquering potential, but back in the mid-1970s, Queen were still mere mortals. Though Mercury loudly professed his belief that *A Night At The Opera* was the band's best album to date, proudly asserting they'd used it to "go out, not restrict ourselves with any barriers and just do what we want to do," there was still a level of nervousness within the Queen camp about its lead single.

"With *Bohemian Rhapsody*, we just thought it was a very strong song and so we released it," Mercury told former *Classic Rock* journalist Harry Doherty upon its release in 1975. "But there were so many arguments about it. Somebody suggested cutting it down because the media reckons we have to have a three-minute single, but we want to put across Queen as songs. There is no point in cutting it. If you want to cut down *Bohemian Rhapsody*, it just won't work."

He was right again. While *Bohemian Rhapsody* wasn't strictly where Queen found their feet, it was the moment the public finally caught up with them. Having ignored those warnings from onlookers, including friend and DJ Kenny Everett, Queen soon found themselves vindicated. Everett played it 14 times on his radio show that very same weekend. An American DJ followed suit and suddenly the record company felt compelled to release a song they thought was commercial suicide. It was the Christmas No.1 in 1975, stayed at the top of the charts for nine weeks and became the UK's third best-selling single of all time, after *Candle In The Wind '97* and *Do They Know It's Christmas?* which, let's face it, don't really count.

Cut to now and it's become Queen's most enduring masterpiece. More than 40 years after its release, its daring fusion of heavy metal, show-tune balladry and light opera remains the high watermark in Queen's career, and a tribute to the band's collective imagination and sheer bravado. It broke the mould in 1975, and no-one has even dared to try and compete with it since.

"Working with Queen, you can't put it in normal terms," the album's producer Roy Thomas Baker once explained. "Queen can't work like any normal group. They utilise each other's talents to the fullest. The middle operatic section in *Bohemian Rhapsody*, for example, took about six to seven days to record in total. It was multi-tracked and there were so many harmonies that it takes quite a while to sort it out. It's the same case with Brian May's harmony guitar work. A lot of the band's ideas are revolutionary," he said. "You've got a band that has a relatively heavy rhythm section, is versatile musically and sings exceedingly well. The Queen situation is unique."

"We're just very different," Mercury told Doherty at the time. "We do things in a style that is very different to anybody else. If people don't like the songs we're doing, we couldn't give a fuck."

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